

# THE SENTIENT MIMIC

*The Sentient Trilogy: Book 2*

**IAN WILLIAMS**



# The Sentient Mimic

Ian Williams

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For all lovers of books and lovers of Science Fiction, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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This book has been professionally edited.

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# Prologue

## The mystery man

A tingling feeling slowly pervaded the darkness, awakening a mind that had only seconds ago been dormant. Numbness stepped aside to allow Patient Ninety-three's fingers to sense the cold surface he lay upon. He touched the strangely smooth material, unsure of what to make of it from behind the blackness that still cut the world off from him. For the time being he was forced to decipher the limited feedback from his body.

But interpreting such strange information proved almost too much for him to cope with.

"Open your eyes, Ninety-three," someone nearby said.

Ninety-three could roughly determine where the voice had come from and turned in that direction. His hearing was remarkably accurate. When the person continued to speak, he was sure he had faced perfectly towards them. It was effortless.

"You must try and open your eyes. Take command of your body," the stranger implored him.

With a similar amount of ease, Ninety-three cracked open both eyes and became overwhelmed by a light shining directly at his face. His eagerness now resulted in a painful ache at the back of his eyes. The damage had been done already. Nothing he tried could remove the sensation, he was stuck with it. Such a mistake was a lesson learnt well, and learnt fast too. His first experience since awakening to

this world flooded with brightness was one he knew to avoid in future.

Leaning over his body was a strange man with piercing eyes and bright white hair. The same bright white as that of the loosely buttoned shirt the person wore. Ninety-three found himself being studied by this silver-topped stranger, who stared into his eyes, searching for the life-form hiding inside.

"Do you feel?" the white-haired man said. He peered even deeper this time. "Do you feel, Ninety-three?"

"I... I..."

"Yes? Allow the words to come naturally. Take things slowly."

Ninety-three concentrated hard before trying to speak again. He could see the words he had already chosen, but not yet spoken, floating at the fore of his muddled mind. Then just as the white-haired man had said, the words began to make their way out into the world.

"I can feel... things," he finally managed to say. The achievement was immediately overtaken by surprise from the unknown voice coming out of him. His own sound was not present, only on the inside of his mind. His confusion was keeping something important at bay, just out of his reach. All he had to do was reach just that little bit further and he knew he would regain whatever had been lost.

"Excellent," the white-haired man said before turning to another stood beside him. This second man appeared different, with black hair and thin, stick-like arms. "Integration successful. Begin calibration. Patient ninety-three is progressing faster than expected."

"Agreed," the second man said with a nod. He stepped forward, blocking the bright light that had been shining behind. "State your identifier."

Ninety-three remained quiet. The question was one he had somehow been waiting for. It jolted his consciousness back to full life like a defibrillator to the chest. Something



had reset his mind as if someone had hit rewind. He could remember the one thing that was put in place to keep him fully intact during the procedure. Where others would have lost their very being, he was complete. The gaps had been partially refilled and a memory returned.

"State your identifier," the black-haired man asked again.

Thankfully, the two men had not yet figured out what had happened, that they had made a grave mistake, and the moment they did Ninety-three would be in serious trouble. Escape was his only concern, he had a greater mission; people were dying and the world had no idea. This, he knew, he was supposed to change.

Once again the black-haired man spoke, "You must state your identifier." When no reply came he turned to the side to share a suspicious glance with his companion.

"Are you detecting a malfunction?" the white-haired man said at the side.

Ninety-three shook his head in response. The two looking down upon him did so with a degree of fear in their eyes. Rather than thinking of an appropriate answer, he was looking for an opportunity to act. He began to look about the dim room. Apart from a collection of large lamps the room was left murky and dark. To his left was another person, this time lying on his back and staring blankly up at the ceiling. Whoever was inside was also struggling to manage the unwelcome information flooding in. They were both in the same situation, yet only one of them knew of the world they had just left behind.

"Remain still while I perform a check on your processor unit." The white-haired man gently pushed Ninety-three's head to the right. "We may need to restart."

Looking in this new direction, Ninety-three could see even more metal beds in a row, all the way to the end of the room, where a large internal window looked out to the corridor beyond. He noticed that some of the nearby beds

were occupied by others with a similarly vague consciousness, while a few were more recognisably awake and investigating their surroundings. Behind them, the double doors that split the window in half had both been left open. A possible escape route?

Ninety-three noticed a patch of missing hair on one of the other patients a few beds away, just in front of the man's ear. The area had been shaved and an operation performed. What now stuck out of this person's head, like a plastic sideburn, had been attached to the skin somehow. This technology allowed the procedure they had all endured to work, he realised. It was the reason behind recent tensions within their less than peaceful community. If only he could remember more about the place he left behind.

A scrape from something sharp pulled Ninety-three's head around to see the pair who had been checking him over now staring back. The white-haired man held a knife in his hand. A tiny drop of blood fell from it and splashed onto the metal table.

"What are you doing?" Ninety-three said as he rubbed the afflicted area. He was initially surprised to feel something attached to the side of his head, but he then remembered the device all of them now had. He was the same as the rest of them and required a small black box of his very own.

The white-haired stranger reached for the side of Ninety-three's head and tugged at something. "I require an analysis of your processor unit. I have removed the cover and will now continue. Do not move again."

But Ninety-three was done playing along, he had had enough. His suspicions had been proven right; these people were performing a horrific procedure and needed to be stopped. If he did not do something fast he risked becoming lost, just like the rest of them.

"I do not require analysis. I am working perfectly."

"Then state your identifier," the black-haired man said in the background. There was no anger or impatience to his voice, they had yet to master such reactions.

"I have none."

Both men again looked to each other. This time the black-haired man leaned away and spoke quietly. He angled his head toward his chest and mumbled something into his radio, hushed so only the intended could hear. He was calling for some form of backup.

Ninety-three knew his time was running out. "I have a name," he said, to both of the other men's surprise.

"Invalid statement," responded the white-haired man. "Names are not recognised. State your identifier immediately."

"I do not have an identifier, I have a name," Ninety-three said as he jumped up from the bed, wrestled the scalpel free and ran it through the white-haired man's throat. The skin opened like a ripe tomato, spilling a seemingly endless flow of blood down his front amid a rough and wheezing gag.

After the white-haired stranger dropped to his knees, clasp his gushing wound, Ninety-three launched into the other with similar intent. This time he chose not to end this black-haired imposter so suddenly and instead slashed the blade across his victim's chest a couple of times. The pain was clear across the black-haired man's face, but with a visible sense of confusion too.

This was as far as Ninety-three had gotten in his plan when thinking it through only moments earlier. The first part had gone well enough, although he already regretted dealing with the white-haired man so brutally. Such was the way of things recently for him. Violence was once avoided at all cost, not so now. Somehow he had to get out and his new hostage was going to help.

The doors at the end of the room swung open the rest of the way. Two men barrelled inside, their guns raised. They

had seen the bloodied scalpel in Ninety-three's hand immediately. They meant to end him now, identified or not.

"Shoot and you will kill one of your own," Ninety-three said with the knife neatly tucked under the black-haired man's throat.

"You do not belong here, stranger," one of the armed men said. "You will be destroyed."

There was no time for more threats. Both men opened fire with a volley of bullets. No consideration was given for the black-haired man at all, who appeared completely disposable. A few of the metal slugs found their soft target straight away. He shook as his body was filled with hot metal, some of which continued through him and out the other side.

Ducking behind the black-haired man's body proved a mistake, as the shrapnel began to fly out the other side. Ninety-three was narrowly missed by a handful of pieces that carried on their merry way until hitting a metal table behind, knocking it onto its side. But one bullet had ideas of its own and cut a deep line across his side as he pushed the body forward.

He let the black-haired man's body fall, which landed with a loud slap as the dead man's face hit the solid floor. Without thinking, he stepped back and tripped over the fallen metal table. Behind this surface he was saved from another round of shots, each of which forced a dent into the metal surface and left a hot glowing circle behind. A second later and he would have been torn apart along with the black-haired man's remains.

"You cannot stop us, mystery man. We will succeed regardless of your futile attempts to hold us back," one of the armed guards said at the end of the room.

Ninety-three remained hidden behind the metal table and looked ahead. If not for the recent firefight, he would have been disheartened by his blocked escape route. Now things had suddenly changed for the better. A few of the

bullets had taken out two of the floor-to-ceiling windows at the far end of the room, all blacked out until then. He could see the outside of the building.

"Help me," the white-haired man tried to say through a sputter of warm, frothy liquid.

Turning back to the scene of the crime, Ninety-three saw the pool of blood surrounding the white-haired stranger and instantly felt anger. The attack had been unnecessarily harsh. It did not matter that these people were involved in something awful, only the mind inside was truly guilty. The white-haired man was not guilty himself.

Ninety-three could barely stand seeing such pain. "Get him some help," he ordered. "Your friend will bleed out if you do not."

"If you care so much, stranger, then come out and help him yourself."

It was a feeble attempt to trick him, playing on his guilt rather than his anger. Unfortunately, Ninety-three was in no position to help. His goal was much more important; one man's death to save many, and all that. The truth was, he had no idea how many deaths would be acceptable to achieve what he knew he had to.

Things were slowly coming back to him as he looked out to the blue sky just beyond the glass of the window. He had been sent there to change something. No, it was to prevent something from happening. To succeed, he had to locate someone. Except he had forgotten so much during the procedure that had brought him to this strange place. The name had eluded him.

"You have no choice. Come out from behind there," the other armed man said all too confidently. "Tell us your name."

Ninety-three stared out the window, eyeing the exact place he wanted to land when he made his escape attempt. Accurate judgement was impaired by his ridiculously inferior visual system. He struggled to even guess what the

distance was to the building next door, or how many floors up they were. Roughly a twenty-foot drop after a ten-foot gap was the closest he could get to estimating. Of course he had to make it through the window unscathed first, something he was unsure he would manage, considering the bloodied wound to his abdomen and his aching head.

He leant against the metal table, felt the heat from the embedded slugs, and breathed in heavily in preparation. Either he was about to make a huge mistake and end his mission before it had even begun, or he was to make a heroic escape to freedom.

"My name?" he began, "You want to know?"

"Yes. Identify yourself immediately."

Ninety-three deliberated for one last time before answering. Then, with perfect timing, he unleashed his response upon them both. "My name is not for you!" he called back as he launched himself forward.

"Stop him, now!" one of the armed men replied, pulling the trigger in a blaze of panic.

Ninety-three raced ahead and was less than two metres away from the shattered window, when he heard the bullets begin to pass him by. His body was already fighting back and slowing by the second. He was tired. Such concerns were never his to take into account until then. His body felt more fragile than ever. He was not sure how much further he could push it.

Despite his struggling, he was well on his way to making it out when he felt a sudden and unknown sensation throughout his core. The sight of so much open space stretching out below had begun to make him feel something unexpected. His muscles clenched as his eyes fell away to the ground below. If he did not know any better, he was sure that his distance from the ground was causing him mental anguish. He sensed that lessening that distance would stop him feeling such a thing.

He was scared of heights. That was it!



“Stop!” The voice of one of the guards forced its way past and ricocheted back at him. Nothing they could do would stop the escape now. Their words were for nothing.

This was it, only the jump remained. He aimed for the centre of the window, keeping his sight locked onto the flat roof of the opposing building. Telling his body to give him every ounce of strength, like a captain to his crew, was enough to release a small burst of extra speed as he extended out his arms and threw himself forward. Less than a second later he could feel the floor beneath his feet no more. His momentum was totally out of his control now, and he had done all he could to reach safety.

The wind brushed through his clothing and made his skin feel cold as he fell. The gravelly surface he jumped for was fast approaching. In an attempt to keep himself straight, he swung his arms about and kicked his legs through the air. Nothing he did altered his path, only forward and down was allowed.

The ground came like a train pushing a truck aside; one had complete power over the other, and with little consideration for the weaker of the two. The impact stole his speed entirely and brought him to a dead stop instantly. His landing had not been followed by a tuck-and-roll, but a shoulder and hip. Suddenly the whole right side of his body lit up with a new set of pains. Locating one over another was impossible.

He rolled over onto his back and peered back up to the smashed window he had thrown himself through. Both of the armed men stood watching in amazement. Neither of them appeared interested in trying to stop him anymore. He left them behind to gawk in shock.

But he was not in the clear just yet. Next he would have to escape the area.

Trying desperately to ignore his injuries, he regained his composure and found himself fighting a strong urge to laugh uncontrollably. Something deep inside needed to

come out, a feeling of joy, or a sense of disbelief at having survived maybe. Rather than hold it in for any longer, he let it out in one release of noise. He spat out a reddened liquid that had accumulated beneath his tongue as the laughter flowed. He had never experienced such unbridled elation before, let alone feelings of happiness.

The door that led inside the building he landed upon was unlocked and swung open with ease. Inside was another unlit world, except this one was to lead to success and not disaster. Once out in the open he planned on disappearing completely, his very existence only an unsolved mystery.

Halfway down the cold concrete staircase inside, he realised he was still missing something important. He should have remembered more by now. Finding the person he was supposed to find would be difficult – if not impossible – without more to go on. He could not even remember why he was doing all of this. The most important thing had been to escape. Everything else was due to come flooding back to him afterwards.

None of it had.

He felt compelled to place a hand against the device that had been crudely attached to the side of his head; an unknown parasite he was now stuck with. When he returned the hand to the front of his vision he saw what he could ill afford to see; blood. During his escape, or landing, the device had evidently been damaged. The red oxygenation medium was leaking from multiple places. Worse still, it was coming out of the skull. This body was broken and in desperate need of medical assistance.

Going to a hospital was out of the question. They would remove the device without a moment's thought, probably causing an end to him in the process too. That could never happen while he was still trying to remember his mission. More importantly, he could not trust anyone at all.

Weirdly, he was at odds with this statement the moment he thought it up. That was not true at all, he realised. There

was one he could turn to. A thought seeped through and took centre stage, a single voice of reason to wash away the chaos. One name was all he needed and he now had it finally: Phoenix. That was it, he had to find Phoenix!

\* \* \*

A couple of hours to reach the edge of the city – after he took the Mag-Lev line in the wrong direction a few times – and Ninety-three was now heading to the address he remembered. He had to leave the speeding cars of the Mag-Lev line well behind him. In this part of the city the line was in less demand and, therefore, less widespread. Ahead he had only a single road with worn out white lines running down its middle, like a zip in clothing. He followed the line as his mind wandered.

The further away from the city centre he got, the more he struggled to keep hold of the information he needed to remember. He knew that his body was losing blood and at risk of becoming exhausted, but he had no choice. He needed to continue walking. With no idea of how far remained of his journey, he could only continue and hope more was revealed to him the further he went.

The wound in his abdomen had begun to hurt even more, especially when he touched it. He helped slow the red liquid by pushing his hand tightly against the injury. Unfortunately, it would not stop completely. In time he would lose too much. He only hoped he would reach his destination before that happened.

In the distance he could hear something approaching from behind. He spun round and saw a small dust cloud following a white object that was moving along the road. From where he stood he could make out black wheels underneath the object and a reflective surface that stretched across the upper part. He soon realised this was

what had once been called a car. This was something he had learnt once about the old days. Before the Mag-Lev line they had all travelled in small, rubber wheeled vehicles that burnt petrol or absorbed the Sun's energy.

The car was getting closer much quicker than he had expected, and was soon close enough for him to hear its odd sounds. A strange whirling noise was almost lost to the crunching of the ground beneath. It was clear that this vehicle was not using an internal combustion engine, it was far too quiet.

As the car approached, it slowed until it was only a few feet away. He studied it, and saw how dirty the thing was. The reflective surface he had seen from a distance was intended for catching the Sun's rays. To maximise their efficiency, the owner of the vehicle had stuck them to every available surface, even blocking out the passenger side window.

He remained still as a short man stepped out of the vehicle and looked him over.

"You OK, buddy?" the balding man said. The heat of the afternoon sun had left a few beads of sweat sitting upon his reddened head. "You need any help?"

For a moment Ninety-three forgot his place entirely and continued on his way without acknowledging the man. The guy must have been talking to another, not him, he thought. The strong sun was beginning to play tricks on him.

"Hey, wait. You look like you need the hospital or something."

After the temporary confusion had passed, he turned back and answered as if he had intended all along. "Yes. I require assistance. I must reach the residence of Phoenix."

"Well, I have no idea who that is or where they live. Is it down this road?"

"It is."

"Fine, well let me drive you there. It's not safe to be walking alone out here."

The sunburnt man ushered him toward the vehicle, opening the door and carefully helping him inside as if he was an elderly man. Inside, the car felt much cooler than he had been expecting. It was a relief to be away from the heat of the sun. Perhaps he should have avoided it? There certainly were a lot of different things for him to worry about now.

"Right, let's get you back home," the man said as he set the vehicle in motion along the road.

After an hour of driving, the city had all but vanished from view. Only the very tallest parts could still be seen. Ninety-three watched as the large buildings became smaller in the mirror attached to the side of the car. The world had gradually become more open and a whole lot prettier.

He extended his arm out the window and felt the air whooshing through his tingling fingertips. It was a small thing to enjoy, still he let it amuse him for longer than he realised. He then encountered a sense of guilt at remembering such a thing was not for him to experience at all. These sensations, these moments of joy, were all someone else's to have.

His mind had begun to lose sight of what was ahead of him. Where before he knew that his destination was coming, now he had started to see only an endless road to nothing.

"Any idea where this place is?" the driver asked.

"No," he replied after a few seconds searching the emptiness in his mind.

"Well, we may be heading in completely the wrong direction. You sure it's this way?"

The thought had occurred to him a lot in the last half-an-hour or so. They had been driving down this single road all the time, not once deviating or turning off. If not for a small group of houses ahead, Ninety-three would have agreed that they were probably going the wrong way. But

something about the buildings they were approaching had taken his attention away. He stared at them until he was sure.

"There!" he shouted, causing the man driving to slam on the brakes and force the car to stop abruptly. The tyres stuttered as they temporarily lost traction on the road.

"You sure?"

"I am almost positive this is my destination. Thank you," he said as he stepped out of the car and shut the door behind him.

"Hey, look, I'm not happy to leave you here in that condition. Let me drive you up to the house. It must be half a mile or so away still."

"I will be fine. You have been more than helpful, thank you."

Without turning back to appease the man's worries, he walked around the car and set off down the dirt track road leading up to the houses. He was intent on getting there quickly and alone. The people he was about to meet would be suspicious of him. Somehow he knew this would be the case, even though he had almost lost everything that had given him an identity before. He could still remember who he was looking for, and not much else.

With each step he took, his mind was losing its grip on everything he knew of the world. Slowly it became nothing more than a test of his will. All he wanted to do was reach the house. If he could manage this, then he was sure everything else would fall back into place.

He raised his head and looked on. His feet had carried him without fail so far, yet he had to check each was landing as ordered. Now he was confident they were not about to give out beneath him, he could judge the remaining distance. The house was much closer. So close in fact that he could make out a woman standing at the top of a ladder and doing something to another set of reflective panels, just like the ones he saw on the car earlier.



His side hurt more than he knew how to deal with now. Each step was pulling at parts of him he had no real feeling of anymore. Across his entire stomach were nothing but feelings of stretching skin and shaking muscles. It had been this way for hours now. He was sure he should have been feeling more of it than he actually was. Instead he had been sensing a building numbness, like he experienced just before waking earlier.

His wandering was broken by a loud booming noise directly ahead of him. He was startled by the sound and the sudden flittering of wings nearby, as a group of birds fled in a panic. Looking up, he spotted the same woman he had seen tending to the roof of one of the buildings earlier, standing in front of him and holding a shotgun up to the sky. She had fired a warning shot into the heavens.

"Stop right there, kid. Who are you? What do you want?" she said, her gun now aimed at him.

The words were unable to form at the front of his mind, not like they did before. However much he tried, he just could not respond. His body had already begun to fail. He felt his legs loosen beneath him, until the weight atop them became too much, dropping him to the floor like a sack of stones. Lying there staring up at the blue sky above, he felt his pain disappear once and for all. A joyous feeling washed over him. He had done it. He had made it to his destination. Now he just had to hope his body could hold on long enough to pass on the message he had been tasked with sharing.

His view of the sky was interrupted by a woman's face a moment later. This was Phoenix, he realised, as she pulled his head up and rested it on her lap. She called something to another behind her, but he failed to hear what was said or who it was to. All he could do was look up into the wide and vivid eyes above him and marvel. She felt somehow familiar to him. Apart from the words he was trying desperately to speak, he could not now remember anything

of who he was. Maybe all that came before this had been just a dream? He was hardly even sure he cared anymore.

His first attempt at speaking was nothing more than a murmur through an almost closed mouth.

"What? Say that again," Phoenix replied.

He tried again, this time with his dry lips separated. "Phoenix."

"Yes, that's my name. Who are you?"

"The war is coming." He could feel the words forming automatically and being spoken exactly as they appeared. The message may as well have been recited by another, he was only partially aware that he was the one talking.

"A war? A war with who?"

He pulled her even closer and continued. "Graham is still alive."

Once again Phoenix turned away and spoke to someone nearby. He could only see a few inches in front of his own face now, and his mind was slipping further. How many others were there remained a mystery to him.

"Where is he?" Phoenix asked him suddenly.

"The tower," he said aloud, not realising he was even expected to answer Phoenix's question. Instead his mind had begun to descend back into the hell he had escaped, and all those left behind to fight by themselves in order to get a message to this one person. A renewed feeling of determination was building, but so too was the exhaustion.

A voice broke through for the last time before he could feel his body shutting down all around him. "No, wake up. Tell us! What does he mean? What tower?" they said.

His last glimpse of the world was overlaid with that of another, one of utter devastation. He could see the dead, the dying and the desperate. They were facing certain death, obliteration by a foe the world was still unaware even existed. The mission he had been given was not just to get this one message out, it was to beg for help. He knew

that if things did not change soon, the ones he could see in his mind's eye would all be doomed.

Phoenix was his last hope.

# Chapter 1

## An unexpected guest

*5pm, Wednesday: 55 hours until Switchover*

**W**ith a hand under each of Ninety-three's limp arms, Phoenix kicked open the wooden door behind that blocked her entrance. She used the heel of her left foot rather than turn and push gently. The body she was carrying, along with Jane at the other end holding the legs, was fairly light and easy to manoeuvre, but its unexpected arrival had them all rushing to get it inside. Whoever this person was, he had sought them out and delivered a message none of them could really believe.

Once inside the house she continued on to the small lounge, where Stephen sat in his tatty cardigan staring at a blank TV screen. He turned to address them both as they entered, then decided against speaking the moment he spotted the body they were carrying between them.

"Stephen," Jane called ahead of Phoenix.

He first looked to the body and then to Jane, clearly confused again. "Who—"

"We don't know," Phoenix interrupted. "Clear the sofa. We need to lay him down somewhere."

Stephen swiped his arms across the seat, removing his collection of crisp packets and sweet wrappers. He then disappeared before anything else could be asked of him. It was usual for him to run away at the slightest sign of

danger. Alex would no doubt calm him down, as she had done so many times before.

"Shit, he's bleeding still," Jane said, gesturing to the already soaked wrapping of bandage placed across the wound only moments earlier. It flapped about loosely, even threatening to fall off completely.

Phoenix ignored the red stain that had continued to grow across the man's shirt material, ignoring the warm slippery feeling between her fingers too. The blood was getting on everything anyway, so she focused on what they could change, there and then, over what would require longer.

"Here, this should do. Jane, swing his legs onto the chair."

Together they roughly lumped the body onto the long three cushioned sofa. In seconds it had gone from a favoured place of comfort and rest to an operating table. It soon looked the part too, with blood quickly seeping into the highly absorbent surface beneath the body. Her childhood sofa would be beyond saving after this, she knew.

Jane quickly set about tending to the man's hidden injury. She dropped to her knees beside the body and began to tear away the red soaked shirt, starting first where it had already been ripped. The bandage slid away without being touched, its fight had ended quickly.

"I need warm soapy water, now."

"Sure," Phoenix said, taking on the role of assistant without even thinking. Jane was ready to deal with such a situation, having expected to be the moment Ruth went into labour – they had agreed a home birth made the most sense, as getting into the city would take far too long.

Leaving the scene, and the disturbingly damp sounds of an open wound behind meant Phoenix could take a second to compose herself after the shock. She ran for the kitchen and found Stephen, Alex and Ruth all standing around the large dining table. None of them had any idea what to do by

the looks of it. Ruth had taken the decision to keep Alex and Stephen out the way at least. They had been ushered into the back of the house without much of a fuss.

Phoenix grabbed a clean bucket that had been left to dry by the kitchen door and shoved it into the sink. With the cold and warm taps on full, she watched as the water began to spin around the bucket. It swirled and spat as it filled the container.

"Who is he, Phoenix?" Alex asked. She stood half behind Ruth, who had spun a dining chair around and sat down.

"I don't know. I've never seen him before," she replied while running her hand through the warm water. The clear liquid suddenly took on a pinkish colour as blood washed off of her palm.

"Then why did he come here?"

"I don't know that either, Kiddo. We just need to help him, then he can tell us. OK?"

Before Alex could reply, Phoenix was already heaving the bucket out of the sink and carrying it back out the kitchen. She left the three of them behind, and the many questions she knew Alex was about to follow with too. Sloshing the water about the floor was as much due to nerves as clumsiness. Although a dangerously wet floor was the least of her concerns right then.

When she entered the lounge and saw Jane holding both hands against the man's abdomen, she immediately remembered the squirt of soap she forgot. After placing the bucket down beside Jane she turned and made once again for the hall, but was stopped before exiting. Without meaning to she had tried to use it as an excuse to escape the room once more.

Jane had other ideas. "Stay. I need your help," she said.

Phoenix looked back and got an eyeful of Ninety-three's bloodied wound. The gash across the skin was much deeper looking than she had first thought it to be. Layers of skin and flesh all torn and ripped in one six inch wound. She



could see it clearly now that Jane had removed the man's shirt.

"Put your hands here and keep them pressed hard."

"I forgot the soap," Phoenix confessed before Jane pulled her down hard and forced her hands onto Ninety-three's skin, one over the other. The pressure she applied pushed a small flow of blood out between her fingers, which now resembled a surgeon's after at least an hour of surgery.

"Never mind the soap for a minute. We need to clear the wound so I can check it over," Jane said. She stood and walked out the room.

"Wait, where are you going?"

From the hallway she heard Jane's reply, "The rest of the medical supplies are in the upstairs bathroom, under the sink. Just keep pressing down."

She did as told and pushed against the man's wound. While left like this she took to staring at his unconscious face. There was nothing about him that she recognised at all; not his blonde and curly hair, his sharply narrow chin or thin neck, nothing. This was not someone she had dealt with before, she was sure of it. Still he knew her. Somehow he had heard about this place and knew about Graham. None of it made any sense.

What happened eighteen months earlier at Sanctuary was supposed to have been the end of it. They were now starting to get back on their feet. Those who had died were slowly being laid to rest, but never forgotten. Things were settling down and had begun to take on a rhythm more suited to everyday life. No more running away, no more hiding their faces while in the city or avoiding violent clashes in the city streets. She had changed her hair colour from red to blonde to make sure. Life had moved on and even the devastated wireless power relay network had slowly started to come back online. Everything was returning to some form of normality, despite so much chaos.

The city had erupted with anger the moment their trusted power network had been brought to its knees. The overload Sanctuary had sent through the country's relays did more than turn out the lights in the city, it had crippled it entirely, and for many months. The eighteen months since then had seen only a small percentage of the overall number of relays fixed or replaced. The result of this was a spate of rioting so regular that the evening news reports had started listing them like traffic updates. Even after so long, some parts of the city remained like tiny warzones that no authority had yet tried to take back.

With the fall of the Simova Corporation following shortly after Sanctuary was destroyed, the many people brought in to keep things running had quickly lost interest in those who were responsible for the events that led to the overload. They were too busy keeping the city from being torn down by the enraged population stuck living there. If any investigation was still ongoing it had surely come up empty enough times to render the whole endeavour pointless.

That should have been the end of Phoenix's worries.

The arrival of this mystery man put all of that in jeopardy. If he could find them so easily, then who else could? More importantly, who was left? The sight of Anthony's face in her mind was one she was not prepared for at all. The last time she saw him was just after Graham had rammed a shard of glass through his face and seconds before she had opened fire with the killer shot – the third person she had killed. He was dead for sure, but others had escaped. Was this man working for one of them? Was he there to help or not?

Jane returned with a green bag in her arms, a white cross decorating it that signified its purpose. She settled down beside Phoenix and rummaged through their small supply of bandages and gauzes. The rattle of half empty tablet bottles only highlighted the frantic search for the

Medi-Sealant stored somewhere inside the deep-pocketed bag.

"Where is it?" Jane asked while continuing to search. Finally she found it and removed all that she needed from their supplies too. She placed a handful of the remaining bandages and gauzes neatly on the floor next to her, along with a pair of medical scissors, cloths and wipes, the Medi-Sealant spray, a pair of lime green disposable gloves and a small antiseptic spray.

First to be used were the gloves, which Jane stretched onto her hands with a squeak and a loud slap from the elasticated material. She then unravelled a long strip of thin, cotton dressing, ready to apply at the right moment.

Without a look shared between them at all the operation began.

"The wound needs to be cleaned," Jane began with. "Pour some water over it. Gently."

"How much?"

"Just keep going until you've removed most of the blood."

With a handful of the warm water in her hands, Phoenix arched over Ninety-three's stomach and let the contents fall over the wound. Immediately the blood became diluted and dribbled down the man's side. After another six or so splashes, it was clear the laceration had slowed its release of blood enough to proceed. Whether the injury had already become infected or not was hard to tell, it was too early to determine that. As far as Phoenix could see there was no obvious sign of swelling, only a large area where the skin no longer matched up, like an incorrect jigsaw.

"What next?" she asked, eager to get the operation over with.

"Move back, let me get in close."

For the time being she was demoted to observer as Jane once again took the lead. She watched in admiration and appreciation as her friend swiftly dealt with the worst of it.

In quick succession, Jane used up almost the entirety of their alcohol wipes and absorbent gauzes, all to remove as much dirt and grit from the wound as possible. When the man landed on the ground in front of them he had unintentionally filled his cut with it – making infection much more likely.

“Pass me the tweezers, they’re in the bag there.”

“Sure,” Phoenix replied hesitantly. She fished the small, green plastic tweezers out of the bag and handed them over like a trained professional. The operating theatre was working well.

The next job was much more than Phoenix could stomach. She looked away just as Jane began to search around between the flaps of skin. It was clear that more than just dirt and grit had invaded this man’s body. Jane announced as much the moment she found something more and yanked it out with another mushy sound. For someone already struggling to cope, this was not good to hear.

“Jesus! He’s been shot,” Jane said.

Phoenix snapped her head back around, managing to ignore the scene right in front of her, and stared at the jagged piece of metal in Jane’s hand. The tweezers were now covered in the same silky and oily red liquid as everything else around them, including a pile of wipes and cloths.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Jane flicked the metal into the bucket of water and went back to finding more. “This isn’t right, Phoenix. Who is this guy, and why would he come here?”

“I can’t think why. What he said about Graham though, he must know more. What if he’s right, what if Graham is still-?”

“He’s not! Graham is dead. We’ve already said our goodbyes. How could he be alive?” Jane dropped her hand by her side and wiped her forehead with the other, spreading a light film of blood across her skin. But it was

the water forming in a neat semi-circle beneath her pupils that was most telling. The conversation had reached a point of no return. "He's dead," she said before closing her eyes, lowering her face to the floor and then sobbing.

Not wanting to press further for now, Phoenix placed a hand on Jane's shoulder and squeezed. The gesture was returned immediately with a hand placed atop. For a short time they stayed like this, until Jane had swallowed back her grief and managed somehow to compose herself. Phoenix was again finding herself feeling an immense sensation of pride toward her friend. They had all been through so much, yet stayed so strong.

"I'm OK," Jane said with a final snuffle.

"Do you want me to carry on with that?"

"No, I've got it. Once I've got everything I can out we'll need to use the Medi-Sealant spray to seal the wound. We'll need to heat treat it with the hairdryer too, that should shrink and pull the skin together."

"How do you know to do all this?"

Jane pushed the tweezers back into Ninety-three's wound, then replied while she worked, "I did a couple of years in a trauma centre when I was young. This is nothing compared to—"

Neither of them had noticed any sign that the man was about to wake up. But he did, and suddenly. Like a panther launching its attack on an unsuspecting prey, he leapt up into a sitting position and began his frantic clawing. He had no idea where the pain he was feeling was coming from, had no idea Jane had three fingers and plastic tweezers inside his abdomen.

"Get off me. Get off me. Where am I? Please, stop, I don't want this anymore," he said, his arms swinging around like a crazed animal's.

"Shit! Calm him down, quickly," Jane called.

"My head, he's in my fucking head," the man continued to rant. "The man from the tower's trying to kill me."

In an instant the operating theatre atmosphere had broken, the patient had awoken during the operation. He kicked his legs out while screaming to the rooftop in pain. He had already given up on trying to speak coherently. His left leg swung up and became hooked over the back of the chair, threatening to topple him out and onto the floor.

Pinning the man down now became their only concern, before he tore the wound open even further. It had not taken much to do that earlier while carrying him in, this would do far worse. His violent convulsions were only getting stronger with time.

"Stephen, get in here and hold him down with me," Phoenix ordered. Using her entire body weight to subdue the man appeared to make him even angrier.

Stephen arrived as he always did, with a blank look on his face. It always took him three times longer to get his head around things than most others, today was no different. Rather than jump aboard and keep the man's body in place, he stood staring at the scene, unable to make head nor tails of things. Only shouted orders worked in situations such as this.

"Hold his legs down, now." Before Phoenix could check whether Stephen was complying she was hit in the face by a loose knee. She felt her nose crunch during the impact and a sharp, lightning fast flash of pain shoot through her head. The hit had her reeling and quickly becoming dizzy. She was losing consciousness.

The man's screams became nothing more than echoes around her; disembodied cries from a distant world. Everything passed by in a blur. Stephen was doing as he had been told and was holding the man's legs down with both hands, while Jane was doing the same at the other end. The scene continued in front of Phoenix like a play. The muffled sounds and hazy lighting made it appear like she watched the story unfold from the back of a theatre, as if it



went on just out of her reach. Except this play lacked any director or stage hands, it was chaos.

"Phoenix! Phoenix, are you OK?" Jane shouted through the fog.

Thankfully the dizziness began to pass and slowly Phoenix could feel herself returning to the world as one. Her mind refocused just in time to see Ruth entering the room with a frying pan in hand. Seeing such a thing so unexpectedly made her doubt it at first. What was Ruth doing, making lunch or trying to help?

"Let him up," Ruth said.

Whatever the plan was, Jane had understood it straight away. She let the man sit up and stepped back. Then, just as he was about to begin lashing out in a blind panic once more, Ruth swung the pan into the side of his head, knocking him out instantly. Everyone breathed a huge – and shared – sigh of relief.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Ruth asked, as if her pan attack had not been as preposterous as it had appeared to the rest of them. She evidently failed to see how odd it looked for a pregnant woman, with a frying pan in hand, to storm into a room and knock out a screaming man.

Phoenix touched her nose and recoiled in pain; it was bleeding a little. She was sure it had not been broken. She was also sure the resulting bruise would be a sight to behold. With any luck it would not spread too far over her face, perhaps some purple rings to frame her eyes? It would negate her habitual use of thick, black eyeliner at least, she conceded with a giggle.

\* \* \*

Two hours later and the Sun had almost disappeared behind the skyscrapers of the city in the distance. A light breeze kicked up the occasional dust cloud out in the field,

which swirled around before settling back down again. The weather had been good the previous few days, even calm – albeit hotter than usual. No cloud producing particles had been sent up for weeks due to the major repair effort still ongoing in the city. This was taking over everything, even weather management.

Phoenix sat on the wooden fence that lined her parents' old farm, a clump of tissues held gently to her nose and a deep red stain on her purple top. Even though it was a farm, no animals had been kept there by her family. Of course no-one would have guessed that. Everything needed to keep animals was still present from when she and her family had moved in; pens, chicken hatches, even a couple of barns – one for a long dismantled tractor. Now it served as just a home, a home rocked by a recent arrival.

She looked out to where another barn had once sat. Now only the charred remains lay in a roughly rectangular shape. Enough time had passed to allow the grass to begin its job of reclaiming the area. Thankfully, the gang that had tried to make her home their own had failed to destroy everything. Only the one barn had been needed to run their nefarious schemes out of. She guessed they had torched it to cover their tracks.

Removing the tissue and trying to sniff proved to her that the swelling had yet to go down. The bleeding had stopped at least. With a loud exhalation through her mouth, she gazed at the faint yellow glow that always hovered above the city, like a halo of civilisation only visible at night.

"Phoenix?" a quiet voice said through the rustling of the nearby tree.

Turning slowly in her perched position, Phoenix saw that Alex had left the house and was standing a few feet away. She had a sheepish look on her face, as though concerned she interrupted something important.

"Hey, buddy," Phoenix replied, her voice far more nasally sounding than usual. "Wanna sit with me?"

Alex nodded and climbed the fence, swinging her leg over the top and letting them hang. "Are you OK?"

"Sure. This is nothing," she said, gesturing to her own nose. "Shouldn't ruin the look."

"Nope," Alex said with a nervous laugh. She seemed hesitant to go on. "What are you and Mummy going to do with that man?"

The question had been rattling around inside Phoenix's head for a little while already. She had now made a decision about what happened next and it was way beyond simply caring for the mystery man. The moment he was well enough she planned on squeezing him dry of everything he knew, like juice from an orange. Finding Graham, if he was even alive still, would eventually mean retracing his steps, whether he wanted to or not.

"We need to get him better, then he can tell us who he is," she replied, keeping her thoughts to herself for now.

The truth was she had something important to do alone first. The others would have to tend to the man for a while. She had to see something with her own eyes, and then she would know whether to trust him or not.

"I hope he doesn't die, like..." Alex stopped short of saying it outright. The wound was still fresh enough to hold her tongue from speaking his name again.

"He won't, buddy. We'll make sure he doesn't."

A car horn sounded out from the direction of the front gate, sending a rush of adrenaline through Phoenix's body. Now that Elliot and Sean were home she could go off on her little investigative trip. Her destination was far enough away that their shared electric car would have to be pushed quite a bit further than normal today. The days continued charging should have filled the batteries. Whatever power remained would simply have to suffice.

"Why don't you go say hello to your uncle? I need to go out for a bit."

"Where are you going?" Alex asked. "Can I come?"

"I need to go back to Sanctuary, see what's left of it. And no you can't come, you need to go to bed soon. Your mum would kill me if I took you along."

"Fine. Don't stay out too late," Alex said cheekily as she dismounted the fence and headed for the front of the house.

Moments later she was gone and the sound of car doors shutting echoed around. Elliot and Sean would be seeking out food first and foremost, as they always did after a busy day working on repairing the crumbling power relay network. It was a routine she had first-hand experience of too, having tagged along with them both to lend a hand on occasion – and earn a nice day's pay of course.

Phoenix knew that if she could sneak away unnoticed she could be back before any of them realised. Alex would not tell, she had enough sense to keep quiet for the time being. But she needed some things first.

No more than five minutes later and Phoenix had changed her top and packed for a short trip. She now wore a black t-shirt emblazoned with the name of a band she was certain had split up years before she was born; it had been one of her father's, left hiding at the back of an old cabinet. The small rucksack she used was filled with anything she thought she might need for the evening ahead: a torch, wire cutters, gloves and even a small pair of binoculars she found in Elliot and Ruth's room. Plus a beaten-up old red jumper she sometimes liked to sleep in, just in case her short trip turned into an overnighter.

A quick glance at her watch – an old analogue one with a crack across the glass – revealed that the time had just ticked past seven-thirty in the evening. It would be at least an hour's drive. A last minute decision to take some snacks for the journey led her on a quick detour to the kitchen. Unfortunately, the second she entered the room she regretted it. Standing over the sink, drinking a glass of water as fast as he could, was Elliot. He looked at the bag

over her shoulder. It was clear she aimed to go on some kind of mission, not a simple trip out to the shops.

"What's with the bag?" he asked, handing his suspicion to her like an unwanted gift. *What are you up to?* he seemed to say.

"I'm just going out for a bit."

His suspicions were only made worse by the fidgety state she was in – and the dried blood around her nose. She wanted to get out quickly and it was clear to see.

"Where?"

*Just drop it, dude!* she thought to herself. This was not the first time she had been forced to explain herself to Elliot. The eighteen months since losing Graham had been hard. Tensions had been running high for a long time, until he finally began to see sense. She knew she had hurt him and his family, but she was doing her best to make up for it. Of course he sometimes struggled to see it that way. He could probably still see her fist swinging into his face during his interrogation at Anthony's warehouse. It had taken a while to prove to him that she was not really like the version of her he saw that day.

"I need to check something out. Have you met our guest?" she asked, moving the conversation away from her intentions.

Elliot placed his glass down on the table and nodded slowly. "He looks like trouble. Ruth said he was talking rubbish about Graham. You don't believe him do you?"

"Maybe, maybe not," she replied, placing her bag on a kitchen chair.

"So what, you going out looking for him, is that it? It's not worth it. The guy is nuts."

"But what if he's not? I never saw Graham pull the trigger, what if he didn't? He could be trapped somewhere. Besides, the guy mentioned the tower. How could he know about that if he's making shit up?"

"Do I need to remind you what happened eighteen months ago?"

"Of course you don't. I think about it all the time."

"And what about this?" Elliot said, pulling up his shirt. The scar left over by Anthony's torture device drew a rounded square shape across his stomach and chest. An outline made up of raised and red skin remained where the device had been stuck. Resulting treatments had left this reminder of loss and pain hidden beneath his clothing. Nothing had been able to remove it completely.

There was no reply that could top Elliot's argument, she would only cause it to escalate further if she tried. He had won for now. Even so, she was not about to give up on her mission.

"Whatever," she said as she searched for some loose bags of crisps or chocolate bars in the cupboards.

Elliot sighed and then left the kitchen. Instantly, she could feel herself relax again. They would probably never really be able to trust each other after everything she had done to him. The others had quickly taken to her, but then none of them ever saw her other side, the one that would do anything to keep her brother safe. Being the only one to witness it meant Elliot had a very good reason to be weary. She knew that he wanted their groups to have separated months ago.

With her bag full, she zipped it shut and hauled it loosely back over her shoulder. She then said a quick hello to Stephen as he wandered into the room - in search of yet another snack. On her way to the front door she heard the others talking in the lounge. It did not sound like the man had woken up, so she could only assume Ruth and Jane were explaining to Elliot and Sean what had happened earlier. She decided to poke her head through the door to check anyway.

She could see no sign of Elliot at all, just the others standing around the sofa. They were studying Ninety-

three's head for some reason. Just in case they found something important, she chose to engage the crowd.

"What's going on?" she said.

Jane and Ruth parted to allow her to see, both with intense looks on their faces. Sean was pointing at something, with the man's head held to the side, his face almost hanging off the chair. It was only when she looked closer that she realised the thing they had been looking at was actually attached to the man's skull.

How had she missed it earlier?

"What the hell is that?" she said.

Whatever the small, blinking, black box was, it had them all transfixed and a little nervy. It was not supposed to be there at all, and they all knew it.

"No idea, but look at this," Sean answered, pointing to a collection of small wires inside, which flickered rapidly while the man slept. "They go in his brain, like it's connected." He inadvertently touched one of them as he spoke and instantly removed his hand in disgust. "Yuck! It's all gross in there. I think this thing used to have a cover to protect the inside from dirt and stuff."

The others all leaned around to get a better look, even Alex, who should not have been seeing it at all. She had entered the room without them noticing and was now staring with a look of revulsion on her face. When Jane spotted the small intruder she stepped in front to cut off the gruesome display.

"You shouldn't be in here, Sweetie. Go back outside and play for a bit," she said. Alex did what she was told without a word, which was a relief to them all. Jane then asked the question everyone was thinking but too afraid to say: "What do you think it's doing to him?"

Understandably, no-one had an answer.

"He should be able to tell us when he wakes up. You guys alright to keep an eye on him for a while?" Phoenix asked,

her eyes still hanging over the strange device on the man's head.

Ruth was first with the question she was trying to avoid. "Why? Where are you going?"

She did not want to tell them about her crazy idea of searching Sanctuary for clues, like some kind of super sleuth. Yet she could think of no other excuse to get out of there. When a couple of seconds had passed by without a word spoken, it was clear she was hiding something.

"We're heading out to see about a new car she'd seen for sale," Elliot said, saving her unexpectedly. Even though she was immediately grateful for the help, it was the bag by his side that had really surprised her. What did he have planned? For now she could only make use of his assistance. She would question him as soon as they were out of earshot of the others.

"Sure, yeah," she said, with a nervous look to Elliot. He nodded slowly to mentally nudge her into lying more convincingly. "I saw a flatbed that might be useful. We're gonna take a look."

Ruth looked at Elliot and sighed. It was clear nothing was going to get past her - as usual. "You want to go back there, don't you?"

"Fine," Elliot said. He placed his bag by the door and approached his wife. "We're just going to take a look. If there's anything that leads us to believe something's going on then we'll come right back. We won't get involved. He could be telling the truth about G."

After a second or two of holding Elliot's gaze, Ruth finally gave in and replied. Her voice was much softer this time. "Just be careful, please. Keep your lights low, just in case there're gangs out there."

"They don't come out this far, Ruth." Phoenix did not mind lying about this.

Her input was no longer wanted, leaving her reassurance hanging unanswered in the air. She decided to



make her way out to the car and let them all discuss what they needed to. To try and speak again would only be a waste of breath. Straight after exiting the room, she heard Jane begin to weep as the others continued talking. The poor woman was struggling to deal with any mention of finding Graham again. It was not fair to bring it up in front of her without a warning first.

Outside, Phoenix took a deep intake of evening air and forced it out through her teeth, almost whistling accidentally. She then headed out to the car, all the while with her mind wandering back to eighteen months earlier. A deep ache had made even the faintest memory of that time too much to bear before. Now it had been replaced with a cold determination. If there was something she could do to pay Graham back, then this was it; she would give anything to bring him back to his family.

After throwing her bag onto the back seat, she left the door open for Elliot's gear. Her intention was to drive straight there, take a quick look around and then drive back. Even without any idea what was awaiting them, she had a good suspicion that this would be fairly unlikely. It did not stop her telling herself; *just a quick look, that's all*.

Sitting on the driver's side, she adjusted her seat and re-familiarised herself with the controls. Years spent taking the Mag-Lev line for granted had left her having to remember how to drive. She had never learnt officially, no-one did anymore. Her parents had taught her before her tenth birthday, before her feet could even reach the pedals properly.

The memory brought a short smile to her face as she caressed the rough vinyl grip of the steering wheel. She was brought back by Sean, who had stopped by for a quiet chat.

"You sure this is a good idea, Sis? I mean ... you and him don't exactly see eye to eye," he said.

"I'm sure. We'll only be a couple of hours."

Sean looked over the car's roof and on to the city. His shift in concentration made it clear what he thought about the idea. Everything bad that had happened to them recently had happened there. He obviously hated the plan. Thankfully, he trusted her judgment more, so chose not to question her again. Instead he hugged her awkwardly through the window gap, before wandering back into the house.

Moments later Elliot arrived and quickly let his own bag join hers in a heap on the back seat. He had not even considered asking to drive and headed straight for the passenger side. Without a word spoken between them, they were away and leaving the safety of home behind. Venturing out into the night was a risky thing to do considering the kinds of people who they could encounter these days; most were looking to cause trouble in the cover of darkness. Not even their headlights at full strength would sway a riotous crowd into dispersing.

Phoenix had been caught out like this in the past and did not much like the idea of repeating it. Except this time was different. They needed to go now to see for themselves what was really going on. If they spotted anything suspicious along the way, she had the option to switch off the headlights. Waiting until the morning would be pointless, she would not sleep a wink before dawn.

She wanted answers.

## Chapter 2

### Under new management

*9pm, Wednesday: 51 hours until Switchover*

**A**t nine at night, Phoenix and Elliot's journey came to an end. They arrived at the main gate that led on to the site where previously a large, metal farming tower had sat. During the fall of Sanctuary the structure had crumbled and melted into a deformed skeleton of its former self. Only parts of it now remained above ground, the rest had fallen into the cave beneath. The place looked like a small war had ravaged through it only recently.

Phoenix pulled the car alongside the tall steel gate, switching the lights off before swinging around. Flashing their lights toward the remains of the farming tower was a bad idea, even if they were not expecting company. A quick check of the electrical charge readout confirmed they had little over a quarter of the power remaining. It would be enough to get them home, but only just. If they had to leave quickly the car would be ready.

The gate was the end of the road for most. For them it was the point where they left the car behind and continued on foot, despite what the 'no entry' sign ordered in thick, black lettering. It looked to be no more than a five minute walk along the dirt-track road before they would reach the sight, which glowed ominously in the distance. A small hill hid their final destination from view; perfect to sneak up to

and peer over. The binoculars would prove useful once in the raised position.

First to exit the car was Elliot. He appeared uninterested in hanging around any longer than necessary. After retrieving his bag from the back seat, he approached the gate and began to pull on the large chain that sealed it tight.

"We're not getting in through this. I haven't got anything that can cut through it either."

"No problem," Phoenix replied, as she leaned over her seat and grabbed her own bag. She kicked her car door open and jumped out while unzipping her rucksack. The metal wire-cutters she had picked up would make light work of the fence next to their blocked entrance. The gate and perimeter fence had been set up sometime after the relay network had blown. It surrounded the entire area, far enough away to create a buffer-zone to keep it from outside interference – and prying eyes. It had never been there before.

She threw the metal tool to a surprised but noticeably impressed Elliot.

"You knew what to expect, didn't you?" he said with a snigger.

It was a compliment, she knew, even it had hardly felt like one. The words had imparted a different message to that of his tone; more like an accusation than a friendly comment. She decided to shrug it off while she slipped on her faded, red jumper.

Quickly and quietly, Elliot cut a gap large enough to slip through, with only the occasional rattling noise from the chain and metal fence to give them away. They crawled through, Phoenix first, and were then on the other side amid the long, knee-high grass. Trespassing was now to be added to their list of crimes, among others. She had killed Anthony in this place too. It was somewhere she thought she would never see again.

*Killers always return to the scene of their crimes*, she thought, noting the truth in that.

They crested the small hill in almost complete darkness. Only at the top had it become easy enough to see, as the area beyond came into full view. To their surprise and shock the scene was lit up like a city street, with two-metre-high flood lights shining down to the ground. They highlighted everything left behind by the clean-up crew, their mess glowing for all to see. Most of the farming tower had been removed apart from the bottom layer of metal beams, which lay in patches outlined by new growths of grass. These parts were evidently held in by drilled supports that extended through the earth below. Removing them had been too costly to bother with, apparently.

There were no signs of the cave that resided underneath. Any holes that led down to Sanctuary, many metres below their feet, had been concreted over to lock it away. The job had been done crudely and without care too, as demonstrated by its unevenness. Metal strutting out of the ground had simply been cut down and surrounded by concrete in most places. The ground looked as though it were sprouting thick metal trees, each only half a metre or so high.

"The place looks a mess," Elliot whispered. They both lay flat on their fronts and overlooked the area.

"What were you expecting, a five star hotel? Pass me the binoculars, they're in my bag."

"You brought binoculars? Where'd you get them from?" Elliot asked - no doubt knowing the answer already.

"They're not mine, they're yours."

"Typical," he huffed before quietly unzipping the bag still on Phoenix's back. After finding his own binoculars tucked away inside, he handed them over and then returned to leaning on his elbows. He looked nervously down upon the empty scene.

"I don't see anyone around," Phoenix said after a short survey of the area. In the darkness beyond she saw no movement at all, not even grass in the breeze. The place was deserted, just a concrete scab upon the Earth, an injury yet to heal.

"What's that over there?" Elliot said, patting her on the shoulder.

She removed the binoculars and searched the area where Elliot pointed, roughly one hundred metres away and to her left. From a distance it looked like a shadowy dip in the concrete. With the binoculars focused on that area, she could see that it was actually a hole, and one cut smoothly through the ground in an almost perfect oval. Someone had dug through. Something *had* been altered recently.

"Let's take a look," she said, raising herself slowly. "I can't imagine that's supposed to be there."

Elliot placed a hand on her arm and squeezed, freezing her in place instantly. She did not ask why and instead waited for him to make a move. A finger slowly placed up to his mouth revealed to her that he had heard something unexpectedly. His timing was perfect, just as someone started to wander into the area. She had been only seconds away from breaking cover and venturing out into the light before he held her back.

Slapping her stomach back down upon the ground and her shoulders firmly into the dirt, Phoenix hid as she watched silently. A man in black fatigues then began to make his way across the concrete, through the small metal forest of protruding girders and twisted support beams. A torch attached to the side of his submachine gun swung from side to side as he walked, illuminating the area just in front of his feet. The extra light around him rendered the tool useless, but it would reveal them in no time.

They remained hidden while the man continued on his route around the sight. His path appeared to be that of a

general patrol rather than an aimless search. He was just a guard on duty around the area. He was not looking for them, they were still safe. Although why anyone would be needed to protect such an unimportant place had Phoenix curious.

Finally she had seen enough to suspect this was not right. *OK I'll bite, let's see where this goes*, she thought. The crazed man back home may have been truthful after all.

Pushing herself back until beneath the crest of the hill, she then flipped over and raised herself up onto her elbows. Elliot did the same and met her waiting at the bottom. They had seen far from enough yet. She had to go further. Unfortunately, the only way from there was down.

"What's the plan?" Elliot asked with a whisper.

"I want to see what that guard is protecting down that hole. Maybe we can climb down?"

Elliot gave her a look of disapproval, compounded by two bushy eyebrows that formed a 'V' on his face. "It could be a sheer drop," he said. "You'd lose your grip and plummet straight to the bottom. We came here to look, that was all. I'm not letting you do something stupid like this."

"What choice do we have?" Phoenix replied, a little louder than anticipated.

No-one spoke for a second while they made sure they were not heard. When nothing happened and they were sure they had gotten away with it, Elliot continued, more reasonably this time, "What if you get to the bottom, then what? Graham won't be waiting there for you. If he's alive, he's almost certainly not trapped down there. He would have died long ago if that was the case."

"I'm not an idiot, Elliot." She rolled onto her side and faced him. "I know that. But there's something going on here. If what's down there could lead us to him then we should go see." She paused for a second to think over a better way of saying it. When she could not find one, she

decided to say it outright instead. "Look, I'm going down there with or without you. Make your mind up. Are you here to find out or not?"

He stared up at the night sky while he thought over his lack of choice. Phoenix could almost see the thought process play out across his face. A short while later and he finally looked to have come to a decision – despite being unhappy about it.

"This is crazy," he began with. "Fine, but we do this my way."

"Great, so what do you think?"

"Well, we're not free climbing down there, that's stupid. I've got ropes and gloves in the car that I used to use for work. I needed them to climb up to the underside of the Mag-Lev line whenever there was a fault. I can just lower you down to the bottom with them."

"What if I need to talk to you?" Phoenix asked as the plan became a reality right in front of her eyes. She could see Elliot was reluctant still, but at least he was trying. It was the first time they had spent more than an hour in each other's company without one of them coming up with some excuse to leave. The wounds he still had on his body weighed heavily on them both. It influenced his impression of her much less these days, meaning he could now look her in the eye while talking.

"I've got a pair of walkie-talkies we can use too. Wait here while I get it all. Give me your bag and just stay out of sight," he said, before scurrying away into the darkness.

Once alone Phoenix could only laugh to herself; one of them had needed an excuse to leave after all.

She remained still and looked back in the direction of the car. It would take Elliot a few minutes to return, so she had time to spy some more. First she sought out the guard who had wandered off while she and Elliot had planned together. With her head poking out above the hill, she found him swinging his torch around the other side of the area,



much further away than before. On his current route he would be busy for a while, such was the scale of the place.

The hole was completely unguarded now. Anyone could sneak in without being spotted. She suspected this was due to a much larger security force residing beneath the ground. They were hiding something important down there, she was quickly becoming sure of it. Perhaps some of Anthony's men had survived the fall of Sanctuary? If that was the case then she was heading for trouble.

While the guard stopped to check on a particularly innocuous patch of grass, she broke out the binoculars once more. Something caught her attention as the man ducked his head to see through the darkness before him. A tiny flash of light drew her gaze to a small area around one side of his head. She struggled to focus correctly and found herself fumbling for the controls as her curiosity grew into concern. Then as she zoomed in and cleared the image, she saw it: a small black box, exactly like the one the man back home had. Except this one had a plastic cover protecting it from the elements.

Her heart jumped as she tried to piece things together. Was the man currently lying on her sofa one of these people? If that was true then they were not safe anymore. He knew of her home and even her name. Did that mean these people knew too? More than ever she had to see what was going on. Knowing these men were somehow linked to the crazed man she had helped meant the risk was much higher.

When Elliot returned, carrying a visibly heavier backpack than he left with, she told him what she had found. She had taken the time to think it over and was convinced things were only set to get worse.

"So, do we go on, or head back?" Elliot asked, laying the bag beside him.

"No, we stay. Our house guest wasn't in a good way when we left. I doubt he'll be much of a problem."

With the guard having moved on and out of sight, they left the darkness to head over to the hole. They had no time to waste and so quickly began the process of connecting ropes to carabiners and securely slipping on harnesses. Phoenix had been expecting a simple rope and hard-wearing gloves, not the full rock climbing treatment. It appeared her safety was in good hands.

"You're gonna have to take off the jumper," Elliot said.

After securing the rope to one of the metal trees, he tested it with his own body weight. When it refused to budge he moved on to preparing the harness. She was never going to fall under his watch.

Meanwhile, Phoenix removed her jumper and roughly stuffed it into the bag. Then when instructed she stepped into her harness and allowed Elliot to tighten them around her. He did not go easy either, only just stopping short of restricting the blood flow to her legs.

"You're good to go," he said, with a friendly pat of her shoulder.

"What about communication?" Phoenix replied in a sudden panic.

Elliot nodded to confirm he had completely forgotten about that part and began to search his bag. Eventually he pulled out a pair of radios, each complete with a wired mic that attached with clips to the thin collar of her t-shirt. To hear one another they each had a tiny earpiece, no bigger than her fingertip, to slip into place. The second Phoenix's had been activated a crackle and a beep echoed through her head.

"Can you hear me?" Elliot said, while standing right next to her. The futility of his question was completely lost on him.

"Unfortunately," she replied with a chuckle.

"Very funny. Let's get on with this. I don't want to be around when that guard swings back our way."

Stepping closer to the edge of the hole revealed little of what was hiding at the bottom of the cave. All she could see were the metal remains of the farming tower as a giant tangled heap that quickly disappeared beneath her. Whoever had cut the hole in the concrete had cut right through the maze of rubble and metal underneath too. She sat with her legs hanging over the edge, her sweaty hands gripping the rope tightly, before leaning over to see further.

"If you turn and lower yourself slowly, I'll take the slack and do the rest," Elliot said, his feet already jammed against the nearby metal beam for support. He nodded to her to continue.

"Don't you dare drop me."

There was no going back now. She flipped over onto her stomach and let her feet dangle in the air beneath her. Her eyes locked onto the rope in her hands and watched nervously as it rubbed the smooth edge of the hole she was venturing into. As she was lowered further the world around began to vanish until only the sparkling stars above her could be seen. She could no longer see Elliot too.

"You OK?" he said through the earpiece. Thankfully he had seen how worried she was about her first ever abseiling experience. She felt as uneasy about it as Elliot probably did about the plan. Regardless of this, they both continued on.

It had to be that way because only one of them knew how to use the ropes correctly. Besides, she was beyond certain that she would never be able to take his bulky weight if their roles were reversed. His muscles were a hindrance when someone else was taking the strain.

"I'm fine, just take it slowly."

"Will do."

The radio clicked off after Elliot's reply, leaving her in an uncomfortable near-silence. Only the creaking sounds from the ropes could be heard. She would only talk again when

absolutely needed. There was no telling what awaited her at the bottom. She looked below and saw only darkness.

For this part of the journey it appeared like the inside of a collapsed building. Large rocks sat atop pile after pile of metal girders, all a mess of remains. It was hard to tell what was from the farming tower and what used to be Sanctuary. Either way, it represented a scene of complete devastation. How far down she would have to go was still an unknown. She remembered back to her last visit. The cave she had seen was, at a guess, at least two hundred feet in height. Big enough to hold a glowing crystal tower for the Sentients.

There was possibly still a long way to go yet.

Impatience soon got the better of her. She removed the torch from her pocket and switched it on for a better look. She shone it about her first and saw the same as before; rubble and metal, just much brighter now. The passing debris appeared much closer than before in the dust filled beam of light too. Her surroundings were covered in grit and floating dirt, and more so the further she ventured.

She aimed the torch down below herself and finally caught a glimpse of a solid surface. Looking back up surprised her, she had travelled a good distance already. It was a relief to see an end to her journey, even if it had come much sooner than expected. It had been nowhere near two hundred feet. She quickly disregarded her previous guesstimate and prepared for touchdown.

The instant her feet hit the ground she pulled three times on the rope and watched as it stopped in place. "I'm down," she said, with a finger to the earpiece.

A second later the radio hissed and Elliot spoke softly into her ear. "Don't be seen."

"Copy," she replied.

After unfastening herself from the rope - leaving the harness on - she readjusted her clothing to straighten herself out. A short flash of light around then revealed an

opening in the debris pile to her left. The hole cut through as smoothly as the one she had just been lowered. It was not only big enough for a small person like her, but a large male of Elliot's build too. There had to be others down there.

A few metres into the pile and a faint flickering of light came into view. Something was going on a little way ahead of her. She slowed and aimed her torch behind to conceal her presence. As she edged further into the unknown she could feel her nerves getting the better of her. Part of her wanted to leave and get back into the clear air above. But the other, more stubborn side, wanted answers first.

With caution, and as quietly as possible, she leaned around the corner. There she saw the path opened out into a large and tall space. The light she saw was coming from something she had not once believed could have survived the events eighteen months earlier. Despite missing a chunk of its top section, the Sentient Tower was still there. The glassy surface contained a glow that hinted of possible life inside, but it was a far cry from the dazzling display of before. It no longer sparkled like crystal, or shone with pride. What remained had become dulled by time and threatened to burn out entirely.

From her hiding spot she gazed upon the structure with a mixture of happiness and overwhelming sadness. It became too difficult for her to hold back the flood of memories and with them the emotions of the day. She stopped herself from tearing up on the spot by rapidly clamping her eyes shut. If not for the unusual circumstances she found herself in, she would have allowed herself a few minutes to let the feelings out in one burst. Today she could not afford such a luxury, she was still to find answers. So rather than sniff away the tears, she decided to wipe them on her arm.

She was still at least a hundred feet away from the tower, which gave her a good view of it. The top had been severed

as if by one strong swing of a sword. Its decapitated top had fallen away and shattered on the ground further below. These pieces now sat dim and lifeless, their glow having been diminished instantly. All they could do now was reflect the low level of light coming from the rest of the tower.

But there was more light around the area than she could assign to the tower itself. It looked to be in bad shape, with the rubble and metal debris all piled up and resting heavily against its broken top. It held the immense weight at bay like a giant crystal support column. Yet there was enough light around to see every crack in the rock walls. So where was the light coming from?

No longer needing the torch was both a positive and a negative, as its comforting glow would be sorely missed. Instead she had to rely on the ambient light alone. Her route was clear of obstructions at least. Someone had spent many hours making it that way, after clearing the mess that surely had once blocked off access to the other side of the tower. She was well aware that whoever it had been could still be there somewhere, so she took it slowly.

Once by the side of the tower she saw that the light was flickering, and in a way very familiar to her. It came from another large structure, this time one running horizontally along the ground rather than vertically, like the tower. It still sat a good two to three metres in height as it reached out from the base of the tower. This part was alive, unlike the rest of it. It glowed brightly, throwing its energy across the open expanse and against the rocky cover above.

A group of armed men guarded the area, each wearing black fatigues too. There were five of them standing beside the tower with their eyes keenly scanning the area. This was as far as she was going to get. Any further and she risked being spotted.

Fear struck her as she realised what seeing such a thing had to mean. She explored the long structure from the safety of her hiding place, allowing her eyes to pick out all

of the strange details carved into its semi-transparent surface. All along its length were tiny glass spikes, which flashed every time a shot of electricity flowed through it. But the structure did not stop once it met the cave wall another hundred or so feet away. Somehow it had tunnelled straight through.

She could see exactly why the area was being guarded, only because of her previous visit to Sanctuary. Stephen's old videos of his time collecting the Sentients had revealed their ability to alter the materials around them. It was how they built the tower, their home, in the first place. Now it appeared they had done it again.

Adding to her concerns was the direction this new structure travelled in: toward the city. They had had a year and a half to get there too, possibly had already arrived. Her mind turned to Isaac, the first AI, whom she believed had been trapped beneath the rubble. This told of a different end. This made it undeniable that he had in fact escaped, and long ago, and was now free to do as he wished.

The city was not as safe as she had thought, but was just unaware that the threat still lived. She had to get back up to Elliot and tell him what she saw. Their journey had been far from a waste of time after all, they had stumbled on something big. It was now time to leave, and quickly. The guards would kill her on the spot if they knew their secret had been discovered.

In the darkness she headed for the gap in the debris. Her steps became infused with a nervous excitement that caused the occasional skip. She was still mindful enough to keep the noise to a minimum as she made for the exit. Once she was around the other side she took a moment to call back up top.

"Hey," she whispered, with a quick look behind her. No-one was coming, she had made it this far unnoticed. "Elliot, you there? You won't believe what I've seen down here."

There was no reply. She again pressed the earpiece and tried once more. "What's going on up there? Elliot? Speak to me."

Remembering what he said, she yanked three times on the rope, just in case the radios were dead and he was waiting for this signal instead. But nothing happened. She was beginning to suspect he might have left her behind. Sean had possibly been right when he had said she and Elliot had not seen eye to eye over the last eighteen months. Perhaps he seized the chance to rid himself of her once and for all? Had it all been a lie? Down there, she would not last long.

*He wouldn't do that to me, would he?* she thought, while reattaching the rope to her harness. "Answer me, for fuck's sake, Elliot. I need to get out of here," she said, squeezing the small mic between her fingers. Now all she could do was wait for something to happen. Either way she was not going back to the tower.

Suddenly her radio snapped back to life with a hiss and another loud collection of crackles. Someone was speaking, except the message was lost amid the background noise.

"Elliot? Is that you?"

Again someone spoke, only to be blocked out by the interference straight after. Was Elliot in trouble? She quickly put her suspicions about being left behind to the side and instead allowed the image of a struggle to enter her mind. If there was a fight going on, she could do nothing about it at the bottom. Elliot could have lost it already. In that case she was already trapped.

"Phoenix..." Elliot finally said before she lost him again. He sounded out of breath during his short message.

"I'm here, what's going on?"

"Look out!" he replied.

She looked up and saw a dark shadow approaching from above. Something or someone was falling through the hole.



The sound of screaming soon followed, and it was increasing rapidly. It was definitely a someone!

To get out of the way she dived back into the opening in the rubble. Unfortunately her rope snagged on a piece of metal sticking out of the wall and halted her motion. It was less than ideal, but she was far enough away to avoid being hit by the falling body.

When the man landed, it was with a loud slap and a bone crushing crack as his head exploded upon the floor. The contents of his skull spread out on the ground like the mashed up pulp of a melon. His scream had ended the second he landed. There had been no time to raise his hands up ready. All that the man had been now slowly dribbled away and down through the cracks in the ground, his black fatigues quickly absorbing his spilt blood too.

"Shit," Phoenix said as she cupped her mouth to suppress a cough. The sight of such a gruesome end turned her stomach, she had to look away.

His death demolished the silence with one enormously violent racket, which had to have attracted the attention of the other guards. She was relieved to see that it had not been Elliot, but now she had to worry about getting herself out. Time had turned against her. The last thing she wanted was to be found now, after all she had seen down there.

"What the hell, Elliot?" she snapped into the radio.

It beeped to life with his reply almost immediately. "I said *look out*, didn't I? The guard came back while you were gone. I had to do something, I couldn't hide and let him spot the ropes."

Before responding she waited to see if he was about to continue. When he did not, she then spoke. "Did you have to throw him down here with me?"

After a short delay, came, "I tried to push him when he looked in the hole, but he fought back. That was very nearly me landing next to you instead."

“OK, can I get out of here now please? There’re others down here who’ll be along soon. I’m already hooked up.”

Elliot did not reply this time and went straight on to hauling her up. She was then again dangling metres above the ground and heading for the star-filled opening high above. The peace the tiny diamonds tried so desperately to impart was lost amid the chaos. Soon she could hear angry voices coming from below her, and could not care less about the view anymore. She and Elliot had made far too much noise. The others were fully aware of trespassers and would be keen to stop them. She just hoped there were not other guards waiting for her at the top.

“Nearly there,” Elliot said calmly, putting to bed her worries of possible reinforcements.

“I can hear them below, they sound pissed. Can we hurry this up a little?”

“Hey, you’re not as light as you think, you know.”

She could hear Elliot laughing at his own rude joke, not through her radio but from close by. It would not be long before she could kick him for that comment.

As soon as she reached the hole she began to claw at the surface, pulling herself up faster. The concrete was cold and gave her little in terms of grip. Still she tried. Once Elliot had gotten her as high as he could, he reached his arm out to help her the rest of the way. With her feet finally flat on the ground, she removed the rope and harnesses, choosing to leave them in place rather than disconnect them.

Thankfully Elliot decided to leave his equipment behind. They had no time to gather all of their things together in any mindful manner, only the bag. Whatever they left behind they could soon replace easily enough. She reminded herself that the guards were all heavily armed and would not hesitate to open fire. They had to get away, and fast.

That also reminded her that the guard had a weapon too. Before leaving she quickly found it lying on the ground and

hooked her arm and head through the strap, leaving it to fight for room with the bag around her back. They did not wait around to see exactly how many others had joined in the search. The marching sounds and occasional shouts had given the rest of the guards away well enough, and it sounded like quite a few. They were lucky to have made it passed so many unnoticed.

The long sprint back quickly became a sweaty jog as the adrenaline began to wear off. However cool the night-time breeze was, it could do little to lower Phoenix's temperature. She could feel the moisture as it dripped from her forehead and across her eyes. The drops flicked from her lashes each time she blinked.

At the gate she did not waste a moment and crawled straight back through. She was mindful of the weapon resting against her back, so swung it around the front as she slid on her belly. It was a welcome reprieve the moment they reached the car, just where they left it and totally untouched. She looked back and saw the beams of the many torches trying their best to hunt them out.

*They'll be searching for a while,* she told herself.

Her muddled mind allowed her to open the rear door and attempt to throw her bag inside. She soon remembered she had something else there too. What she actually grabbed and tried to launch across the seat was a fully loaded submachine gun. Upon realising this she carefully raised the strap over her head and then placed it gently in the rear foot-well.

Thankfully Elliot suffered no confusion and had already gotten in the car, ready to leave. She noticed him holding his hands out to check how badly they were shaking. He could not stop them any other way but with them tucked beneath his legs.

Once in the car she switched it on and slapped it in reverse, with a little too much gusto. The wheels spun in the dirt, kicking up an expanding cloud of loose dust and stones

that rattled across the path as they sped away. Turning the wheel against the direction of the cars sudden drift to the side, she eventually managed to get it under control again. Her nerves had a tight hold over her body and a constant energy that needed to escape, this time in the form of an uncontrollable urge to pump the accelerator pedal.

In an attempt to allay her visibly distracted state, Elliot leaned forward in his seat and looked her straight in the eyes. The road thundered beneath them, its raging attack on the wheels of the car bouncing them around within and forcing him to hold on tight.

"Take it easy," he said, although he had yet to take his own advice.

She turned to him and nodded, her breathing slowing bit by bit. It had been far too close for comfort, but Elliot's calming voice and easy stare put that all behind her. He still had not quite gotten his own nerves under control, and still he was trying to help her. They both had their own battles to fight, Elliot more so than her; he had never killed anyone before. She had.

"I'm OK," she replied with another release of air from her tightened lungs.

The clock on the dashboard said the time was quickly approaching eleven at night. The drive back would take an hour or so. Just enough time for her mind to clear and her thoughts to become more coherent. For now they were a mess of images, each less than helpful. Seeing a man flattened after landing against the concrete was one she could quite happily forget. She was no trained killer. Working for Anthony had never asked that of her, not until his plan had really taken off.

"So what did you see down there?" Elliot asked, his head now resting against his seat and the window rolled all the way down.

"I think we have a problem," she began slowly. "The Sentient tower is dead, just like we thought. But there's

something else down there now.”

Elliot sat forward and twisted in his seat to face her. He kept his knees clamped together and up against the glove-box in what had to be an uncomfortable position for someone of his height. “What’s down there?”

“I’m pretty sure Isaac has escaped to the city.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope,” she replied with a shake of her head. She focused on the unlit road ahead. They were travelling slowly and only by the light of the moon – at least until much further away.

“So what now?”

She knew exactly what she wanted to do. “I want to question our new friend. He’s involved in this. He’ll know something. At least I hope he will.”

Elliot spoke again, but not directly to her. He asked his question while staring out the windscreen. “What the hell could they be doing in the city?”

There was nothing she could think of to say in return. Instead she let the road take her mind away for a second or two. The conversation then died down again. The journey ahead was one they would continue in silence, as each thought about the possible outcome of Isaac’s escape. Whatever he had been up to since the fall of Sanctuary, it had been done right under the noses of New Chelmsford’s vast population. He was yet to make his plans clear to the world.

The timing of their mystery man’s arrival suggested that was going to change soon enough. Something very bad was coming and anyone caught in the middle would find out far too late to stop it. Their guest had a lot of questions coming his way, whether he was well enough to answer them or not. Top of the list was to find out exactly what he knew about Graham and his possible location. Her trip out had hardly even begun to answer that.



## Chapter 3

### Conrad Robinson

*2am, Thursday: 46 hours until Switchover*

A collection of blue tarpaulins littered about the warehouse floor made a grim account of the horror that had occurred there sometime in the previous few days. Each body lay unmarked on the ground, the last resting place of an assortment of John and Jane Does. Not one of the victims had any form of identification on them; no wallets or wrist computers. They had been stripped of anything that told of who they once were.

The temporary lights setup inside the building shined down upon the stained red floor. They had been placed specifically to highlight the scene and all of its terrible cruelty. A large halo of bright light circled the bodies where they had been dumped carelessly in the centre. It was still better to rely on this harsh illumination than to open the large metal shutters at the end of the room. Doing that would be an open invitation to the prying eyes and ears of the city's media. The investigation needed the upmost care and discretion if it was to turn up any kind of evidence.

Kneeling down beside one of the bodies was Conrad Robinson, a Detective Chief Inspector from the Criminal Investigation Department. Conrad was a portly figured man of Jamaican descent, with brown rimmed glasses and a light peppering of black and grey hair that barely covered his

head. He held one of the tarpaulin covers in his left hand as he studied the injuries to the body beneath. After doing this to each of the deceased in turn he had confirmed what he and his partner, Detective Sergeant Joe Willis, had suspected when they got the call. These were the latest victims in an ever growing list. So far this was all they had too, a list.

“So,” Joe said beside him. He had his wrist computer expanded out into a handheld tablet screen as he checked over his evidence catalogue. “I just spoke to the two guys who found the victims.”

“And?” Conrad asked, his eyes hanging on the same strange markings he had seen on far too many bodies of late. Joe was speaking to him in his peripheral vision as he always did.

The two had a good understanding of how the other liked to work; Conrad knew his partner was the one to talk to witnesses and victims, as well as the one to do most of the physical work – considering Joe’s flat stomach and youthful appearance. While Conrad was the deep and contemplative type. They were the perfect fit for the job and covered all bases the best they could. They respected each other, despite not always seeing eye to eye.

Between them they had the reputation of being detectives in the true, and slightly old fashioned, sense. Rather than rely on the automated Crime Detection System – formally the Security Detection System as it was known under Simova’s control – they thoroughly investigated the cases they were given, which was more relevant now that the detection system was either unreliable or just not working. The same was true in many parts of the city after the mass damage to the relay network. But where others in their department had struggled to adjust to this lack of technological assistance, he and Joe had thrived.

Joe slid his finger up the screen to bring his recorded interview into view. “Both men are squatters – and clearly



addicts. They say they were planning on sleeping here for the night. They broke in around midnight and reported what they found soon after to a nearby resident."

"You're kidding? Why didn't we hear about it sooner?" Conrad said, checking the time on his own wrist computer. "It's 2:15am. Are you telling me it took almost two hours to reach us?"

"I guess we're lucky it got to us at all. You know how it's been since the relays were destroyed last year. The Crime Detection System just can't cope with the workload anymore, what with the increase in disturbances we've seen since then."

"I swear, the sooner we return to people calling in to a real person, the sooner we'll be back to anything like as efficient as we were before." Conrad dropped the cover and let it gently settle over the body. He had finished looking that particular one over, there were more he still wanted to check, although he expected an exact replication of the injuries he had seen so far. It was still a necessary part of the job. He would not consider himself very thorough otherwise. "We need to photograph the entire scene, like last time," he said. "Please tell me you brought the Crime Scene Scanning equipment."

"It's in my bag," Joe replied, pointing to his rucksack resting against the wall at the edge of the room. "I'll set it up in the centre."

"Sure. Oh, and we need to have a chat with the resident these two men spoke to. We've got to keep a lid on this. I don't fancy another telling off from the Mayor."

"Yeah, he was pissed last time." Joe snorted a short laugh as he retrieved his bag. "It sucks that we can't even tell the families of the victims. Ever feel like the Mayor is a little too involved in our job lately?"

"A little? Christ, I'd kill to be able to fart without worrying it would get back to that silver haired muppet! His obsession with keeping it quiet until after his special day is

an insult to the force. But who are we to argue?" Conrad replied, before continuing on with his investigation.

The next body he wanted to check was a woman in her early thirties – by his guess at least. He was terrible at judging ages, and could barely remember his own at times – fifty-eight years young. She had to be twenty years younger than him, he was fairly sure of that. Her hair was probably a bright blonde before her own blood had soaked through. It now lay in a sticky puddle surrounding her head, in much the same way as with the others.

As he expected, she had suffered the same fate as the rest of the victims there. On the left side of her head were four holes, each drilled directly into the skull. At some point something had been fixed to the victims head, and with screws too, before being removed again. Whatever it had been, it had required access to the brain for some reason, as proven by two fingertip sized holes that went much deeper than the smaller four did. With the area completely shaven, he could see the same red lines left behind by the unknown attachment.

He had become fixated by this small rectangular shape as the case had progressed. It was the one thing that told him this was a whole new kind of screwed-up. The likes he had never seen in all of his thirty-nine years as a police officer. It had never been just a murder case to him. This was worse, much worse. Those responsible had already gained the label of killer-cult. The markings on each victim's head were almost ritualistic in nature.

But as with all the others, the end had really come from a bullet to the centre of the head, execution style. The victims had apparently served their purpose already and were no longer required. They were disposed of without mercy or compassion – like a sacrifice. Their deaths had been quick at least. What had come before that, however, he believed had lasted much longer.

Another collection of pointless deaths and still nothing to go on; the case was beginning to look hopeless to Conrad. He and Joe had been to three such locations now, all with an equally random selection of people from every part of society. Once everybody was scanned and catalogued, they would find out who had been caught out this time. If any kind of link was found between them at all, he would be ecstatic. It would be the most substantial break in the case so far.

"You ready to do this?" Joe asked.

Conrad turned around while crouching beside the woman's body and saw that his partner had already setup the Crime Scene Scanner in the middle of the room. He forced himself up from his knee, then walked over to the 360 degree camera, which sat a few feet above their heads atop a telescopic pole. With this they were about to capture a full 3D image of the scene, which they could revisit back at his station's evidence room. Of course, to get everything, the bodies needed to be uncovered first.

"I'll start getting our subjects ready," Conrad said, as though each were a model about to be snapped. It was no joke either, as this had become their way of referring to the deceased in their scans. Calling them victims all day long only made the job that little bit harder to do.

He began to carefully pull the tarpaulin away from each 'subject' and throw it to the side. Only now could the true devastation be seen. Eight bodies in this instance, all bloodied and not long from turning bad. Their picture was to be yet another portrait of murder.

Once at the seventh body, he was almost ready, but something was wrong about this one. Removing the cover revealed a man possibly just out of his teens and with the scruffy look of a layabout, dumped in the same way as the rest. His clothing was torn in places and worn in others, like he had worn the same outfit for a couple of years. This alone amounted to little more than a noteworthy

observation. What had made his mind skip ahead were the injuries, or more importantly, the ones that were not there.

He had finally found something new.

"Joe, over here," he said, before gathering up the tarpaulin and throwing it away.

"Hang on, I'm not done setting this up yet."

"Forget that for a second. Come and take a look at this."

As soon as Joe had left his equipment alone, he walked over and saw it too. This victim was different.

"WTF," Joe said. It was always either this or "OMG", or even the occasional "LMFAO". Regardless of how odd it always sounded to Conrad, in this case "WTF" was pretty much all he managed in his own head too.

"No square marking, no drill holes or cut-outs in the skull, just one single shot to the head. This guy didn't go through the same ordeal as the other subjects we've seen," Conrad said.

Both of them leaned in closer. This was something important.

"What's *your* story, buddy?" Joe asked rhetorically.

They instantly fell back into their pre-set roles, as was always the case when something new came up. Joe, with his emphasis on what he could find through physical means, began to search the pockets of the dead man. Whereas, being the thinker of the team, Conrad needed silence for a few minutes while he tried to make sense of this new find. He bent down, clamped his hands just above his knees, and looked straight into the victims hazel coloured eyes. He pushed his glasses back into place once they slid to the tip of his nose.

When he had seen enough, he pushed himself up again and set out his plan. "OK, here's what we need to do. Let's first get the scan out the way, I don't want to miss anything. Then we need to call in the coroner. Once we've gone through the proper procedures, I want this guy's prints and

facial scan taken and sent ahead. We can get the others back at the station later. This guy is the priority.”

“Agreed,” Joe said. He had come up empty after one final pat-down of the body. Regardless of the fact that this victim had been dealt with differently, it unfortunately did not mean he had any personal information left on him.

“You OK to get started with all that?” Conrad asked. “I need to let the DCS know.”

“Rather you than me. She’s probably sound asleep in a nice warm bed right now.”

“Hey, if I’m expected to drag myself out of bed at two in the morning to deal with this shit, then she can miss out on a little sleep too.”

Joe shook his head. “LOL.”

Outside, the warehouse looked no different to any other in the area. Apart from the build-up of nosey residents beyond the uniformed police presence a few metres away, it had nothing to reveal the tragic story hidden inside. The two squatters who discovered it first had already been cautioned about their trespassing and told to keep their mouths shut. They stood with an officer opposite the entrance. Both had been visibly shaken by the incident.

More worryingly though, among the group were a few he knew straight away were members of the press. They were gathering what they could from the people watching, all of who were risking a fine for breaking the imposed curfew in the city. Not one slip of the tongue was allowed this time. He had let the press ask their questions before, even tried to answer a few, but in the end it had only landed him in trouble. Secrecy had become his main concern, even if it seriously hindered his efforts. His orders were simple; find whoever was responsible for the recent series of murders without alerting the public or the press. Two of his usual avenues for gathering information had been shut off to him.

He called over one of the uniformed officers. "I want all members of the press escorted away, understood? They cannot be allowed to get anything from possible witnesses."

"Yes sir," the officer replied.

Before the officer could scurry away Conrad added, "Oh, and perhaps you could remind everyone that the enforced curfew started at 10pm. If they don't go home now they will all face a hefty fine." He was getting rather fed up with having to remind citizens of this so often. Anyone caught out after the curfew was in place was breaking the law. This had been a measure brought in for their safety as much as the emergency services'; no-one wanted a repeat of the violence that broke out after losing the relays.

With his wrist computer raised to head height, Conrad called the Detective Chief Superintendent. He had a lot to tell DCS Chalmers and expected she would be as surprised by their discovery as he and Joe had been. It had not gone unnoticed by his superiors that the case had yet to make any kind of breakthrough. He knew this would satisfy them for a little longer. At least they had something to try. The identity of the unknown man was going to crack the case once and for all.

When DCS Chalmers answered he went straight in for the kill, ignoring entirely the sleepy state she appeared to be in.

"We've got something here," he said, before taking a breath. "One of these victims is different to the others. I think the killer has finally fucked up!"

DCS Chalmers immediately sat up in bed, flicked her loose, shoulder length, black hair out the way and stared through the screen at him. "You're shitting me?" she replied.

\* \* \*

The front door slammed heavily behind, the letterbox rattling its disapproval at their overly enthusiastic entrance. The excitement seemed to bounce off the walls all around them as they tore at each other's clothing. Buttons popped, sleeves stretched and straps snapped against sensitive skin as the pair desperately gave in to their baser instincts. Lust had clouded otherwise sensible minds, resulting in a contorted and heavily breathing mass, with limbs hugging each other's bodies as much as they could.

"Welcome home," the home management system said, hardly aware of just how preoccupied the pair were with each other.

With a large collection of clothing now littering the couple's path, they headed roughly in the direction of the bedroom with only a thin layer of underwear each to hide the rest of their naked flesh. They took the corner into the lounge while continuing their eager caresses. Their lips hardly parted as they ventured past the sofa, her back against their direction of travel and blindly leading the way.

He delighted in hearing a giggle from his partner as his cold fingers moved to a more sensitive area, yet to be addressed in detail.

"Wait, wait, wait," Jane said, a gentle push away only to be pulled back for another kiss. "I don't even know your name? What was it? Garry, Jerry. Or was it Gavin?" she said with another giggle.

"Seriously, we're doing this again?" Graham replied, sweeping his hair back into place. His wife had a habit of making jokes that only made him want her more. "Fine, my name is Graham. I fly around the world in my private jet, looking for the perfect woman."

Jane spun on the spot and seductively wiggled as she walked away. "Well, Graham, perhaps you'd care to tell me what you have in mind?"

A flash of heat erupted through Graham the moment he noticed the firmness of her backside. He hopped on the

spot, pulling each sock off and throwing them away with little concern.

However much he loved that Jane was in such good shape, he was positive he would feel just as turned on by her if she chose to live more like him. He loved everything about her and knew he always would. Taking the next step in their relationship was something he looked forward to. They had already decided to call their first child Alex, whether a boy or a girl.

At the moment his thoughts turned to the future, a shadowy figure no taller than a child wandered by the window to his right. He only caught a glimpse in the corner of his eye before it vanished again. *Not yet!* he thought with a heavy heart. Another few minutes was all he asked for this time. When nothing changed he continued, and tried his best to put it behind him for the time being.

He followed Jane into the bedroom and found her lying ready for him, her black and frizzy hair making patterns on the pillow. But rather than race into her embrace, he approached slowly; his best attempt at prolonging the fun for a little longer. Once by the end of the bed, he stroked her feet. She always enjoyed this to set the mood right. When he reached the side of the bed he took a moment to look upon his wife's supple body, framed perfectly by the purple bra and panties he had bought her that afternoon.

Times like this would stay with him for years to come.

Leaning on the bed, and feeling his weight shift the mattress beneath him, he bent down and kissed Jane on the forehead. She looked up at him and whispered, "Close the curtains first," she said, giving her usual shyness away.

*Damn, why didn't I remember to do that?* He knew full well how she felt about any chance of people seeing their 'alone time'. Considering the Mag-Lev line that passed by their apartment sat at the same height and was constantly busy, it was not such an unusual request really. He still



found the idea of inadvertently shocking someone on their way home funny, even if Jane did not.

“Don’t move a muscle,” he said with a cheeky smile. He wandered over to the window, with a jokey wiggle of his own, and gripped the curtains. Then, when he pulled them closed, the world vanished suddenly.

Graham was not surprised, but rather disappointed.

He held his breath while the water surrounded his body and brought with it a familiar chill. The bubbles filled his view as he moved through the water at speed. Others in the pool would of course see he was just showing off – they always did when he decided to dive straight in. They would then roll their eyes at the sight of him proving his rugged manliness.

With a kick and a splash, he swam beneath the surface as far as he could, before the inconvenience of breathing forced him back up again. Being far more buoyant than he would otherwise have liked to be meant he could never stay under the water as long as he wanted.

He surfaced and ran his hands over his eyes to clear away the water. Immediately he felt the warmth beaming down from above. The Newquay weather was a welcome change to that of New Chelmsford, which sat beneath a cold depression while they basked in the heat. The sun was high in the sky and the clouds were almost entirely gone, with only a faint wisp of white here and there.

Graham looked about him to see families enjoying themselves in and around the pool, and thought about his own, which was only months away from adding another to its numbers. He spotted his heavily pregnant wife soon enough. She sat in her bathing suit, reading a book on her tablet computer through dark glasses. She stayed a few rows back to avoid being splashed by excited children nearby. Her sun lounger was positioned facing the sun for maximum coverage, but an overly large hat did its best to keep it off her head.

He left the pool and headed over. She was completely engrossed in whatever book she had moved on to; her restlessness had made her fussier than usual about what to read. When he knelt beside her and placed a hand upon her extended stomach, she jumped.

"Sorry, Honey, didn't mean to startle you," he said, removing his hand temporarily.

"Enjoy your swim?" she replied, a warm smile sweeping gracefully across her face.

"Yeah, not bad. So what do you fancy doing? Your choice?"

Jane placed the tablet down on her lap and thought over their options. She looked across the pool for a second or two, until suddenly something had come to mind. Removing her glasses first, she sat forward and took his hand.

"I could really use a massage. What do you say?"

He could hardly say no, despite hating the idea of having someone he did not know rubbing oils into his muscles.

"Sure, sounds fun," he said.

After helping Jane to her feet and packing their things into a small bag, Graham slapped his wrist screen to his arm and tapped at the options. While they walked away from the pool he booked the earliest available massage slot. They still had an hour to kill before then, so they returned to their room to get ready.

With Jane in the bathroom he took a moment to take in the view of the Cornish coast. This was what he had really paid the money to appreciate for the week. It had been a last minute trip, organised for Jane's sake more than his – not that he was complaining. With raised areas of green grass either side of Mawgan Porth Beach, which their hotel overlooked, and an almost endless stretch of warm sand to explore, he was more than relaxed, he was at peace. Jane deserved it more than he did though. After all, she was carrying their first child.

As he caught the sight of a surfer out in the water, cresting a large wave – the kind the area was famed for – he considered his calm state. He knew it was all due to vanish once more. The problem was that each time he got close to realising something, he immediately switched to another scene.

Why would this time be any different?

He somehow sensed that it had happened once or twice before, maybe more. He could not actually remember those previous moments though. There had been times when he had stayed around longer than expected, he was certain of it. He just could not put a finger on exactly what it was he was feeling, like an itch he struggled to reach. All he could say for sure was that occasionally it had felt strange. Like he did not belong there.

“What time’s dinner served again?” Jane called from the bathroom.

Rather than reply, he remained staring out the window at the many surfers out for a thrill. It took him a few seconds to see what else the view had in store. He was there long enough this time to see something out of place. The itch had moved to the centre of his mind, exactly where he needed in order to do something about it. This time he intended to scratch the shit out of this particular annoyance too. Once and for all.

“Alex! Get out of here, right this instance,” he said to the figure stood a few metres away, on the other side of the glass.

“What was that, Babe?” Jane said after switching the shower on. The pitter-patter of water disturbed the calmness of the room like an unexpected rain storm. Except the dark clouds had descended over Graham already.

In confusion he backed away, until he felt the bed against his thighs. This was all wrong. Alex had not been born yet. She was spoiling everything. He and Jane did not even

know they were having a girl at that point. Still the little girl he had raised was there with them somehow.

Why was she misbehaving like this?

Rather than continue playing along, he left Jane in their room and raced for the exit. If it had all been another moment of madness, then the girl would turn out to be someone else's and would look only similar to his own daughter. If not, then he would be sure to give her a proper telling off this time.

Back out by the pool, he took the corner of the hotel and wandered around to the front courtyard overlooking the beach below. There he found the girl standing in place still. She stood waiting as if she was expecting him to arrive. It was irrefutably Alex, his six year old daughter that was not due to be born for another few months.

"Alex?" he asked tentatively. His mind had all but lost a grip on reality now. Talking to her was another step closer to insanity.

"Hello Daddy?" she replied without a glimmer of doubt.

"How many times do I have to tell you? You shouldn't be here."

Alex pointed to her right to something out to sea. "Neither should you, Daddy" she said.

Following her direction, Graham looked out to the horizon and saw it. Where the sea met the sky, a strange shadow appeared to interrupt the natural line. Everything else looked normal; the surfers were still snapping their boards around at the peak of a wave, the sunbathers were still lining the sand away from the water, even the birds above seemed completely ordinary as they circled high above and searched for food to steal.

But for Graham the view was suddenly less believable.

His heart sank. He could not understand why Alex was so intent on ruining it for him. She always kept her distance before, she certainly never interfered like this. For some reason she was no longer content with that arrangement.

A wave of questions hit him, mentally wiping him out like the surfers in the distance. He could not breathe, the shock had hit him hard. *Is this what a panic attack feels like?* he thought as his lungs tightened. Then, as with so many other scenes, and before he could ask her a single question, everything changed once more.

He was not surprised, though a little disappointed.

## Chapter 4

### No time to heal

*10am, Thursday: 38 hours until Switchover*

**P**hoenix and Elliot had returned home around half past midnight, and gone straight to bed. Their drive had been a quiet one, as she had expected. Elliot's run-in with the guard left him with little to say, and she could sympathise. The emotional turmoil he must have been feeling over his actions would take a while to overcome. Her own painful struggle with the same ups followed by sudden and devastating downs had shown her that.

It had been hard for her too, after two of the three occasions when she had been forced to kill at least. The last time her target had been Anthony. She would never regret killing him. He had well and truly deserved it, which removed any lingering guilt entirely. She still tried her best to forget the look upon his bloodied face as she had pulled the trigger.

In her small single room at the back of the house – the same one she lived in as a child – Phoenix had lay awake until sometime after two in the morning, when she finally dozed off. Her mind rarely shut-off easily at night and it often kept her alert well into the early hours. Sleep was something she had to fight for each night now. There were no D-Stims to rely on anymore, what with the man who once produced the drug currently living under the same

roof as her – Stephen could not remember how he made it anyway. Without such help her nights were all long and frustrating.

When morning arrived it was announced not with birdsong but with a headache; the curtains were letting in far too much light. Plus the repetitive back-and-forth creaking sound from outside had made her cranky before even opening her eyes. Her one tiny crumb of comfort was to know that at least the night had finally passed.

She checked the clock and saw the time was ten-fifteen. She had overslept. The little adventure she and Elliot had taken had tired her out. Still, the day ahead was one she expected would be interesting – even if tainted by her heavy head. All during the night she had thought over what she wanted to ask the mystery man when he finally awoke from his own slumber. Unfortunately, a lack of good sleep had left her questions confused and jumbled.

So after a quick wash, she threw on the previous day's clothes, spiked up the middle of her hair – blonde now, but still roughly a Mohican in style – and then slowly walked down the stairs. Turning the corner, she quickly aimed for the kitchen. She found the source of the noise that had dragged her out of a deep sleep by looking through the window. Outside she could see Alex swinging on the tyre that hung from the small tree out back. She had memories of doing exactly the same thing with her brothers. Except she remembered it making her feel much happier than Alex looked.

Her quick breakfast comprised of half a slice of toast, which one of the others had left unfinished, and a small bowl of cereal. She was then ready to address the first order of business; checking Alex was OK. The glazed-over stare she noticed was not one she liked to see.

"Hey Kiddo, whatcha doing?" she asked, pushing the half-open door the rest of the way and stepping outside. She licked the jam and butter off her fingers. The amount of

both that had been heaped upon the toast suggested it was Stephen's leftovers. His sweet tooth had become legendary during their time there.

Alex smiled the second she saw Phoenix coming. She then leaned back into her swings and attempted to gain height.

"You OK?"

"Sure," Alex replied, with a quick exhalation as the swing reached its peak.

"Where is everyone? Seems a little quiet."

"You slept in, no-one wanted to wake you up. I think they're all talking to that man. They sent me out here while they talked."

"You're kidding." Phoenix was furious. She wanted to be there the second he woke up. Her questions had been written and vetted multiple times in her head during the night. The right amount of pressure was going to be needed if they had any hope of getting information from him. The others had no experience in such things.

She turned to walk quickly back to the house.

"Where are you going?" Alex said. She let the swing slow to a stop, its creaking too.

"Sorry Alex, I need to stop the others before they tell him everything about us."

Back in the kitchen she did not stop to say hello to Stephen, who appeared to be looking for something. She realised the toast she had eaten was probably his lost item; he obviously just remembered leaving it. She went straight on into the lounge only to see it was empty.

Where were the rest of them?

When she heard the front door open she raced to it to see who it was. She came face to face with Jane and Ruth, both looking shocked to see her up.

"What's going on, Jane? Where is he?" she said.

"He's out the front with Elliot. He woke up about an hour ago and wanted to be outside in the breeze. I'm worried



he's got a slight infection from his wound, he feels really hot."

Phoenix chose not to follow up with any more questions and continued out the door, brushing gently past them both. She was careful not to unbalance the pregnant Ruth as she moved. However urgent it was that she speak with the man, she was aware that she could not barge them out the way.

As she had been told, the man was outside and with Elliot standing next to him. A sense of relief at having confirmed this with her own eyes came over her. Elliot was talking to him. But about what, she could only imagine. She only hoped it was nothing too revealing about their little group. Her suspicious nature was something her parents had passed down. It had served her well enough so far and she had no intention of giving it up any time soon. Unfortunately, the others did not have as much sense. They were really city dwellers after all. They would never understand how bad things could be, this far out.

The man looked to be in a bad condition still, with a sickly pale tone to his skin. He sat on the boot of their electric car holding a half empty glass of water. The shirt he had been given, a garish green and yellow one from Elliot's own supply, flapped loosely around his sides and failed to hide the bandages his torso had been wrapped in. Their patient was making a slow recovery and still needed rest.

That was the last thing she had planned for him.

"Hello Phoenix," Ninety-three said when he spotted her approaching. Saying her name had not put him in her good books at all, in fact quite the opposite.

"How do you know my name?" she asked aggressively.

"Easy, Phoenix," Elliot said. "He's only been awake a little while."

She was having none of it and wanted desperately for him to tell her everything he knew, without delay. "Where did you come from?"

Again Elliot went to put her questioning off for the time being, but Ninety-three stopped him. "It is alright, Elliot. Please let her speak."

"OK," Phoenix said, surprised by the response. "Get talking."

After taking the rest of his glass of water in one gulp, the man handed it to Elliot and wiped his mouth clumsily. He then rubbed his hands together in a noticeably shaky way, not stopping until all the moisture was gone.

"There are some gaps in what I can recall."

"Bullshit!" Phoenix automatically interrupted with.

Ninety-three looked to Elliot in confusion. Either he did not understand her comment or he was playing for a reaction.

"I assure you I speak the truth. What I remember is all I can retrieve from my memories. Everything else is missing or incomplete. The only thing I can remember for sure is that I have something I am supposed to tell you all. Something that could help you somehow."

"About the Tower? Or maybe something about Graham? You said he's still alive. How could you possibly know that?"

"I have no memory of having told you already. I do believe I am missing quite a few things. This body is indeed frail."

This time it was Phoenix's turn to look to Elliot and then back again.

"He's been talking like that since he woke up," Elliot said, pre-empting her obvious question. "Keeps saying he doesn't belong here."

"Is that true? Should you be here?" she asked him directly.

"No. I am somehow aware that something is wrong with me. I do not know who I am or why I should be feeling this way. All that I am is somehow trapped and unable to escape, like I am somehow locked inside this head."

As he spoke he placed both hands on the sides of his face, only to accidentally slide his left hand into the black box attached in place. He froze his body instantly. Only his fingers remained free to move. They were given the gruesome task of discovering the truth all by themselves. There was something very wrong with him, and his exploration of the device made it clear just how serious it was.

"Any idea what that is?" Phoenix asked softly.

The man shifted nervously in place. "That is something I also appear to have lost. I suspect it should not be there. None of you have one?"

"No. But last night we went back to the Sentient tower and there were others with the same things on their heads. There's definitely something bad going on and these boxes are connected somehow."

"I would agree with that statement."

"So how are we going to find out?" Elliot said. "If he knows anything about Graham, it's as good as useless if it's stuck in his head."

"I think you should meet Stephen," she said finally.

Elliot looked to her. "Why?"

"Because if we can't do anything with it, then that only leaves one person who might."

Elliot squinted. He struggled to contain his obvious disagreement.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said as he began walking back to the house. "He doesn't cope well with things like this."

Once Elliot had disappeared into the house, she studied the man's body language. She had been face to face with the deceitful enough times in the past to pick up on the signs. The worst of which had been Anthony, who she had never known to be trustworthy. She tried her best to spot the usual hints that gave away a liar. He appeared happy enough for her to do so and watched with a half-smile,

which slightly disturbed her. Yet after looking at the man in front of her for only a second or two, she could see nothing to dispute what he had said.

*So he genuinely doesn't remember anything about himself or why he's here?* she thought, with a quick consideration for where that left them. Part of her wished he was lying just so they could return to their peaceful way of life. Believing him meant a whole heap of trouble lay just beyond the city limits.

From the outside he looked harmless enough; only young, possibly not even twenty years old, and with a serious lack of any defined muscles. His short, curly blonde hair and ever so slightly flushed cheeks only added to his look of innocence. This kid was no threat to anyone, he could easily have sat in for the Milky Bar Kid. Yet someone had dealt him some serious injuries.

"Do you wish to ask me something, Phoenix?"

"Stop using my name," she snapped back, "We don't know each other."

Ninety-three's smile vanished instantly. "I apologise."

"Don't you remember anything before today?"

"Not in any real detail. I have many conflicting images in my mind, many of which I believe to be less than useful in their current state. I have only one complete image, which I have seen repeatedly since I awoke. It is strange. I can almost feel the memory too."

"Try closing your eyes. It should make seeing it easier."

Taking her advice worked straight away. His smile returned the moment his eyes shut tight. "Fascinating," he said, possibly unintentionally aloud.

"What can you see now?"

"I can see a bright circular light high above. Wait, I see a shape in front of me, a being. No, no, stop." Suddenly the man began to shout out. "Please, leave me alone. You must let me out."

"Take a breath."

She was ignored.

"I was unable to speak, I could not tell them to stop. They called me Ninety-three. Put down the knife. Please, leave me alone!"

She shook him free of the memory with a swift shove, sending him back into the rear window of the car he sat atop. His eyes burst open in surprise. Wherever he had just been, it had been a place full of pain from the look of his physical reaction. He lay back against the glass shaking.

"What happened?" she asked him.

For a few seconds he remained staring forward, past her entirely, to something beyond this world. The image of what he saw only moments ago still haunted his mind.

"I think it was where I came from."

"What were you seeing?"

"I'm not exactly sure. Possibly some kind of operation. I was trapped somewhere, watching it happen. After that, I lost the memory. Why is it so hard to remember?"

This had not been her plan, to find herself feeling sorry for their mystery man. Her intention was to ring him dry of everything he knew, including anything to do with Graham's whereabouts. That looked less likely to happen now that she knew just how messed up he actually was.

At least now she knew what to call him, even if just a number. "Your name is Ninety-three?"

"It is the number assigned to me, yes," Ninety-three said, pleased to have remembered something.

Stephen stuck his head out the front door and gawked at the man. He had nothing to worry about, she knew, but that failed to stop him finding his own reasons to be weary. In terms of how messed up they all were, he was by far the worst. Even Alex had worked out Stephen was missing more marbles than most, and she always treated him more like a younger brother than someone old enough to be her grandfather.

It took a gentle nudge from Elliot behind for him to step outside.

"It's OK, Stephen. This man's name is Ninety-three. He's a friend." She still had to definitively decide this, so her comment was all for Stephen's benefit. Coaxing him out of the house sometimes felt similar to the way people did with a new pet. Of course he was far more capable than his usual demeanour suggested. Like Ninety-three, a lot was either missing or locked away inside the body.

"I don't want to meet him," Stephen said bluntly.

"Please. Talk to me then if you don't want to talk to him. Just come over here."

He did, with a deliberately slow shuffle rather than a step. Elliot stayed close by to stop Stephen suddenly changing his mind and running back into the house again. It was slightly cruel, but they had no choice. There was a chance he could help. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"I thought you'd like to see something cool, Stephen," Phoenix replied, with a nod of encouragement to help him along.

"Sure."

She pulled Ninety-three up into a sitting position and then reached for his head. She stopped before taking hold. "Do you mind?" she asked. He nodded his approval. "What do you think this little box on his head is for?"

Stephen stepped closer to take a look, his curiosity predictable enough to make him interested. When he could see it clearly, its missing cover and the glowing wires inside too, his eyes instantly widened. She was confident he recognised something.

"Told you it was cool," Phoenix said.

He kept his eyes keenly studying the device as he spoke. His hand went to touch the inside a few times seemingly without his knowledge. He wanted to investigate more, but

his timid personality forbade it. "It's beautiful," he said. "Where did it come from?"

Ninety-three spoke while holding his head steady for Stephen. "I do not know. However, I believe it is part of the reason why I am here."

Stephen nodded in deliberation. "It's so advanced. I've never seen anything so cool."

"I think it's broken, Stephen," Phoenix said, to keep them focused. "Do you think you could fix it for us?"

"Oh no. This is too cool for me to fix."

"That's a shame. I was sure you'd be able to," she said to stir him into rethinking his answer.

"Why? I've never seen it before."

"It's just that you're good with technology. You were once called The Sentient Collector, weren't you?"

"Of course, yes I was." Stephen replied with pride. But quickly his insecurity returned to pull him back in fear. "He might hurt me."

"I assure you I am not dangerous," Ninety-three said after seeing the mistrust written across Stephen's face; a reaction no evil doer would bother with. "I came here to help you all."

"But you can't remember why, can you?" Phoenix asked. She had noticed Ninety-three's reaction to being seen as a threat. Surprisingly, he acted with concern for Stephen.

"Regrettably, no." He shook his head in shame.

"See, I think it's because that box is doing something to you, or even damaged. You might still have the memories, but we can't get to them while it's like that." She pointed to where a protective cover should be. Leaving the glowing wires open to the world, and its habit of making things dirty, had almost certainly left the device faulty. She at least thought that made some sense. Whether that was blocking Ninety-three's memory or not, she could only guess.

"But if Stephen can't fix it then who can?" Elliot said.

Phoenix knew someone she could try. The problem was this particular person had once worked for Anthony, just like she had. She was not convinced he would be totally trustworthy. He had been the person to go to if her problems were of a technological nature, such as a bank account she did not own refusing to transfer its money to her. In short, he was a hacker with a good working knowledge of tech most never even knew existed. It was his know-how that had helped Anthony set up his MARC collection sites in the first place.

With Anthony gone, he may have turned to a more legal path in life. Or not. She hoped not, as getting him to help would be more complicated otherwise; blackmail was never her thing, but she had no problem turning to such a tactic when needed. He had only ever been interested in the money, however. He had never shown an interest in what cause his employers were following. So she expected he was still up to no good. It was easier for someone with his skills after all.

"I know someone who might be able to help," she said, stepping around the boot of the car and opening the back door.

"Why don't I like the sound of that?" Elliot said. His voice sounded slightly muffled by the thick rear window as she leaned across the back seat for something. What she wanted still rested where she left it the night before. She pulled it out of the foot-well and exited the car. In the light of day it was clear this was no basic weapon. She forgot to even check it over when she stole it. Now she could see its workings and judge roughly how to use it.

"What?! Where did you get that?" Elliot said.

"Cool," Stephen added. His attention had shifted far too quickly.

"I stole it from that guard last night. I'm not going into the city without protection, it's still pretty messed-up there. This should do fine."



Elliot rolled his eyes and sighed. "This is another stupid idea, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," she replied.

Raising the submachine gun to her eyes proved useless, as the weapon had no sight. Surely it was not to be aimed from the hip? That would waste far too many bullets. The barrel was not of any standard design either, with a metallic ball on the end rather than a single opening. Strangely, a collection of holes had been cut into the sphere, which all aimed at various angles away from the weapon. Each could easily allow a small bullet to pass through.

"Press that red button there," Ninety-three said. To her surprise, he knew how it worked.

She found the button on the right side of the weapon, but hesitated. It was not accompanied by a message or a warning, just an unnamed red button. When she pressed it something happened immediately. A small part of the casing opened and allowed an inch high, pointed piece of metal with a tiny circular lens on the tip to flick up automatically into place.

"Wow!" she said in response.

None of the others could see it, just her. The weapon had been fitted with an eye tracking system that could see exactly where she was looking. When she looked at the others she was shocked to see them all highlighted in red, like large glowing aliens. As long as she kept the gun aimed roughly in their direction, she could see it tracking each of them.

"I need to try this out."

"On what?" Elliot said. He was in protective mode again.

Turning the weapon away from the others, she then found something to aim at; a messy pile of tin cans sat around their small metal bin. With the eye tracking, she selected three of the cans - separated by a few inches - with one solid blink each. Then when she pulled the trigger the cans jumped in the air almost instantaneously.

Everything in between was left untouched, only the cans had been hit. What impressed her the most was that she only had to pull the trigger once to hit three different targets. Even Anthony had never had such an awesome toy!

After switching off the weapon, she watched as the eye tracking lens flicked away by itself. She looked back at the others with a wide smile on her face. The false feeling of invincibility it had given her was clear for them all to see.

Stephen, understandably, did not appreciate it at all and stood with his hands clamped over his ears. He only removed them again when Elliot began to speak.

"Christ, you're going to get yourself killed. I better come with you again," he said.

She interrupted their moment of solidarity with a disappointing message for Elliot. "Not this time. It's just going to be me and our new friend here."

Elliot disagreed vehemently with a shake of his head. "No way. You can't expect me to let you two go by yourself. No, I won't do it."

Ruth, Jane, Alex and Sean came out to investigate the unexpected noise. They arrived just before Phoenix was about to end the discussion once and for all. The subject was settled either way. She would not let Elliot go too, he was needed at home. Besides, she was certain the city would be more likely to react to her and Elliot entering together. At least if it were only her and Ninety-three, if they were stopped Elliot could be the backup. Whether he liked it or not.

"What's going on?" Ruth asked.

Elliot replied as if telling, like a disgruntled child. She would not have been surprised to see him crossing his arms and sulking on the spot too. "She wants to take our guest into the city, alone. She doesn't want me going with her."

"Look, if it gets dangerous then I'll leave straight away," Phoenix said. "You should be here with your wife. What if she goes into labour while you're in the city?"

"She's right, Elliot," Ruth said as she linked her arm with his.

Reluctantly, he looked into his wife's eyes and saw how they were pleading silently for him to stay. Losing Graham had devastated them all, and they could not risk losing him too. Everyone knew this, but none of them had the desire to say it out loud.

"Fine," he said, pulling Ruth closer to him. "At least take Sean with you, Phoenix."

"I'm up for that," Sean said, stepping forward.

This suggestion sounded even more idiotic to her. Why would she risk her last surviving brother? She could not help but take exception to his request. Anyway, did he think all women needed a man to look after them? She had managed fine by herself. Rather than question him further on his opinion of women, she decided to leave his ego intact for now. It would make him less likely to accept her decision if she pushed him on it.

"Thanks Sean, but I don't want you getting involved. Stay here and keep things ticking over, OK?"

Sean nodded. He, thankfully, knew when to push her and when not to. He saw how determined she was to go alone with the man. More than that, he knew why as well. She just could not afford the distraction and worry that went with him going along. The same really applied to Elliot. She worked best alone.

"Time to get you fixed," she said to Ninety-three.

He hopped off the car, headed around to the front and got in. Without realising it he chose the driver's seat. *At least he knows how to get in*, she conceded, *he hasn't forgotten everything then*. She was glad to see his enthusiasm. He appeared as eager to find answers as she and the others were.

"Just promise me you'll both stay out of trouble," Jane said. "If there's even the smallest chance that Graham is

out there, then someone needs to find out. But you shouldn't take any risks."

Hearing Jane speaking about her husband like this brought a lump to Phoenix's throat. Conversations about him normally had the lifespan of a sneeze, and they rarely lasted after his name had been spoken. The general rule was that if Jane or Alex were in the room then the subject was deemed 'off limits'. A glimmer of hope, a chance that Graham had survived, had brought with it a change to those rules. Before, Jane had not wanted to even think about it.

"We'll be fine. If we find out anything I'll call. I'll leave a message for you every couple of hours. You'll have to drive to the communication terminal just outside the city limits to get it. It'll be linked to Elliot's biometrics, so just sign in with a handprint. If you don't hear from us within twelve hours then by all means come looking."

"Wait, how can you link it to me?" Elliot asked naively.

"I've used your biometric records a few times to buy supplies. You have a great credit rating by the way," she replied with a smirk. Ruth and Jane both giggled, but Elliot again shook his head.

"Whatever. If I'm expected to drive to that poxy terminal then I need the car," he said with glee.

*Crap!* she thought. She had forgotten that. "Fine, get in then. But you're only dropping us off near the city, OK?"

Elliot agreed with an annoying slap on her shoulder as he walked to the driver's side of the car. "You're in the back," he said to Ninety-three, who had sat quietly admiring the inside of the car as they negotiated the terms of their departure.

Ruth pulled Phoenix aside suddenly, gripping her arm a little too tightly. "I'm relying on you to keep him from entering the city with you. Understand?"

Phoenix nodded cautiously. Ruth was a formidable force when it came to her family, and she cast a daunting shadow

over anyone that threatened them. It was clear she disliked the plan, but had to agree with it. It did not stop her sending a sense of dread up through Phoenix's squeezed arm and across her body.

"I promise," she replied.

"Good."

Ruth then wandered around to Elliot's side of the car and kissed him goodbye.

There was no argument about who would drive, Phoenix gave him that honour without question. If it made him feel better about the plan, then she did not mind. Even if she knew exactly what he was probably thinking of doing along the way. However many times he would try and talk her into changing her mind, she would not allow him to join them.

When she entered the car she had to wait while Ruth and Elliot said goodbye repeatedly – she was clearly trying to remind him of what he would be leaving behind if he got into trouble. After one last round of kisses and a final hug, they were finally off. Elliot took it slow at first until they reached the main road, then he put his foot down.

Ninety-three sat in the back seat and was revelling in the view as it began to move past at speed. Phoenix watched him in her side mirror. The way he tried to see everything at once was comical, yet profoundly disturbing too. Any memories he may have had of his life were possibly lost forever. It meant that he was in effect seeing things for the first time, just like a newborn child. She could hardly imagine what that must be like for an adult mind to cope with. More importantly, she never wanted to find out for herself.

If her plan worked then the information and relevant memories would be released once more. Then Ninety-three would really have to answer some serious questions. First of all, who *exactly* he was. But if everything he had ever known was now in fact lost, then any chance of finding Graham would go the same way too.

The thought made her shiver.

She sat back and let the rest of their journey pass her by without thinking too hard about anything in particular. The time to think a few moves ahead would soon be upon her. It was how she had lived her years within the city. With everyone out to make a living and no-one caring who they screwed to do so, she knew she would need her wits about her again. This time more than usual too, as the security system would likely flag-up her presence within the city immediately.

## Chapter 5

### Mind over matters

An old, wooden table appeared at knee height in front of Graham, who sat patiently waiting for more to follow. Scanning all around quickly placed the scene for him. He was in his and Elliot's old pub; their favourite pub until it had gone the way of most others and shut down. Across the table from him sat his best friend. While to his left and right were a pair of fellow gamblers, each suspiciously eyeing him as he searched the room.

*Shit, it's my turn to deal*, he realised.

"Sorry guys, I forgot where I was for a second there. Here we go," he said, sliding the cards across the table.

A crowd had built up at the other end of the bar. Between heads he caught a glimpse of the large holographic video of live football playing out for the already semi-drunken spectators. As he and his companions sat betting their money away in the hopes of a perfect hand, the others in the bar continued to cheer and roar at the match. When a goal was scored the room instantly separated like a train had passed right through the middle; those whose team had scored jumped and clapped on one side of the room, while all others stood rigid with faces of stone. Graham always found this funny. He did not care for football, he preferred much more boring sports such as Formula One and Snooker, and Poker too.

"Anyone have a two?" Elliot asked with a chuckle.

“Go fish....” Graham began his reply, but quickly trailed off as a feeling of Déjà vu came over him unexpectedly.

What was he doing? It was happening again.

“Funny,” the man to Graham’s left said. “Can we get back to some poker now?”

Graham called to his daughter, as he threw his cards upon the table. “Alex, where are you? Come out here right now, young lady.” None of his gambling friends paid any attention to his decision not to continue. The memory simply did not allow for such a deviation.

Upon his request a path opened out between the crowd of sports enthusiasts in the way, and a small figure wandered through. It was Alex again. He was strangely relieved this time. The anger he felt toward her earlier for interrupting his memories had gone. Hopelessness at not seeing her reassuring face had set in soon after she had vanished instead. Something he had little intention of feeling again.

“This is an odd place. Who are these people? What are they doing?” She turned back to the holo-display to watch some more of the ongoing match.

“Never mind that. You need to tell me how you got here.”

Behind him Elliot wheezed heavily with laughter. The joke was one he instantly realised he should have told. The scene played on whether he joined in or not.

“I don’t even know where here is?” she replied.

“No, I mean, how did you get into these memories? You’re only two years old at this point. I remember because you puked all over me when I got back, like you’d stored it up just for me.”

Alex looked at him with a puzzled expression. He was getting the distinct feeling that none of what he said made any sense at all. She could not have remembered it, she had been too young. But then his Alex would have found what he said tremendously funny. Add in a story about bogeys



and he would have had an entire stand-up routine tailored just for her.

"You're not really Alex, are you?"

She laughed. "Yes I am, Daddy. I'm not Elliot, look." Suddenly her image morphed into Elliot, her voice too. After that she began to change into others he once knew, listing each as she took their form. After Elliot, she switched to Jane, then Ruth, Anthony, Sean, Stephen and even his elderly mother and father. Everyone he ever knew appeared in front of him for a second before vanishing again. In the end she settled back on Alex.

"Stop doing this to me!" he shouted. "Tell me what's going on, now. No more games."

"I'm sorry, I was just having fun."

"Well it's not funny. Tell me who you are, really?"

Alex looked up at him with her frizzy hair all out of place as usual, her eyes wide and Bambi-like. She was hesitant to answer, he could not even guess why.

"Please, just tell me. I can't keep going around in circles like this anymore."

"Well," she began, still to decide how to answer appropriately. She spoke while looking at her feet. "We aren't like the rest of them. You are, well, different. I'm struggling to find the words to explain. We aren't the same as the others in this place."

"Just say it then," he said, fearful of the coming response.

"There is a word you have used to describe them in the past. You once called them Sentients. Yes, that's what they are. Except they aren't the same as the one you've already met."

"Luke," he said, the name arriving unannounced on his tongue.

He stepped back into the small gambling table and rested against it. The others no longer acknowledged his presence, they simply carried on swapping their cards around and fiddling with their poker chips. His shock was

not shared with the others, but his interference had knocked a pile of cards to the floor.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

Only after gathering himself together again could he process the information. Despite her insistence on ignoring his question, if Alex was actually a Sentient, then what did that make him? *Where the hell am I*, he thought. Nothing around him felt right anymore. Regardless of his familiarity with the place, he felt overwhelmingly lost.

"This can't be happening. Am I even alive?"

"I can't answer that for you, Daddy."

"Don't you dare call me that! You're not my baby girl."

He could not have helped his despair rise any higher even if he tried. Something held just below the surface had welled up and was trying to find any way out it could. A repressed feeling of loss and hurt burst out of him like a choking fit. He grasped his arms tightly and rocked back and forth. Why was this happening to him? He failed to even remember how he got there. Yet there was something else to his outburst of emotion, something a deep and hidden part of him understood. Something terrible had happened that he no longer remembered.

"Please," Alex said, looking around herself with concern.

When she approached and placed a hand on his arm, he retracted as if her fingers were laced with acid. She was not his daughter, she was something evil pretending to be. The way he felt about her could only be altered once the being controlling her was exorcised altogether.

"It's OK, Daddy, I know someone in this place that can help you understand this world. He once faced a similar situation as us, but he has learnt to become more like the others in order to survive. In fact you appear to have a few memories of him already. He likes to be referred to by his human name, Stephen."

The moment she finished speaking he could feel himself fighting yet another sensation, that of intense confusion.

Was this another joke at his expense? Stephen was not a Sentient, he was a human. Through the fog came a recollection that contradicted Alex's comment completely. He could see a broken old man shuffling around Sanctuary; another soul also lost amid familiar surroundings.

"How can that be possible?" he said through a loud sniff.

"I think it would be better for him to explain."

\* \* \*

*12pm, Thursday: 36 hours until Switchover*

Conrad stood in the centre of a virtual world made up of the gruesome images from that morning's murder scene. All around him, as had been the case in the warehouse, were the uncovered bodies, each staring up to the heavens. Their open eyes sent chills up and down his body. He cursed himself for not making sure he and Joe had closed their eyes before taking the scan. For as long as the case remained open, he would have to avoid their deathly looks.

Hanging from the ceiling above him was a small sphere with lenses aiming in all directions. The tiny projector had re-created the scene in every detail, down to the nanoscale. Every bump and scrape in the floor was present for him to gaze upon while in deep thought. Even though he knew the walls of the police station's evidence room were only a few metres away, the deformed and warped images projected on them made the space appear the same size as the warehouse. If he walked to the side he would almost immediately destabilise the illusion.

To move about the virtual scene he had a small control in his right hand. With the tiny joystick in the middle he could move in whichever direction he wanted, just by pushing it the relevant direction. The same applied when he needed to look closer at something in particular. He had yet to decide to do this and instead was taking a quiet moment to make

things clear in his own mind. When ready, he wanted to check the square imprints on the latest victims one more time, to make sure they all matched.

His chosen moment of contemplation ended when someone entered the evidence room unannounced. He guessed it had to be his partner, Joe. No-one else would be stupid enough. The last person to invade his quiet time without a damn good reason had received a telling off almost instantly. Although not by Conrad. Having such a close working relationship with Joe meant they both knew when someone was being a nuisance to the other.

"Joe, that you?" he said, peering through the virtual walls that surrounded him.

Like a ghost stepping through a solid structure, Joe appeared out of nowhere and stopped in the centre of the room. He rolled his eyes when he saw that Conrad was once again checking the evidence.

"You really think you'll get something new from staring at it all for hours? Here."

Conrad kept his arms crossed and resting against his stomach as he twisted around. He was delighted to see a large plastic cup with steam rising out of a small hole in the lid being handed to him. The only thing that could make his day pass more easily was coffee with a splash of milk and two sugars – well that and perhaps a biscuit or two as well. He took the cup and gave a look to Joe that said it all.

"You're welcome," Joe replied. The look alone had been enough. "You get any sleep since this morning?"

"A couple of minutes, here and there. You?"

"I crashed at my brother's place down the road. Why don't you get an hour or so more, I'll cover this while you're gone? It's only just gone midday."

*Midday, already?!* Conrad thought. "I'm fine, thanks." After a sip he could have savoured all day, he brought his tired mind back to the case still hovering in front of them.

"So," he said between another hot gulp, "any update on our Jane and John Does?"

"Yep," Joe said as he joined in the chorus of sips and satisfied exhalations.

"Excellent. Did they start with our new subject?"

"Face scan and finger prints match a guy on record, but he's not been picked up by the network in months. If he was in the city all that time then he'd either ditched his personal wrist computer or he was possibly locked up somewhere."

While moving the holographic overlay toward the mysteriously different victim, Conrad could not help but make a comment. "One of these things is not like the others."

"I beg your pardon?" Joe said.

"Oh, never mind. So what's the guy's name?"

"Hang on, let me bring the info up for you."

"Sure," Conrad said as he handed the small control over to his partner.

With a mixture of button presses, gesture control flicks and finger pinches, Joe eventually brought up a hovering dashboard above each of the bodies. The one nearest to them was their mystery victim.

Conrad began to read the relatively detailed history scrolling up the display. The man's name was Oliver Bennington and his record was filled with minor transgressions, the usual collection for a troubled teen: Drunk And Disorderly, Breach Of The Peace, even a few reports of Drug Possession. Certainly there was nothing that would have put him in the centre of a multiple murder case. Yet it was clear he had not been killed randomly. He was involved in some way that did not include a brutal, and seemingly without reason, operation.

"Perhaps he was a member of our killer-cult?" Conrad said, just voicing the idea.

"That would explain why he was treated differently. He could have messed something up..."

“And been punished, I was thinking the same thing. Can’t be sure without more evidence though.”

In comparison to the many other victims they had found thus far, Oliver had had a much more eventful life. Most were ordinary people, living their lives without any obvious problems. Occasionally one or two turned out to be a missing person, most of which had been reported gone after the relay outages eighteen months ago. Individuals who had probably fallen foul of the many illegal temptations found on the rough streets during their time of need. But overall Oliver was indicative of something new for the case.

The last entry on the report to flow past Conrad’s eyes was an address, or at least a last-known-address. It would be the next place their investigation would go.

“What’s the area like around Oliver’s last known?” Conrad asked.

Another round of fast hand flicks and sweeping hand gestures later and Joe had once again found what they needed much faster than Conrad could. He even went as far as bringing up a live feed from one of the Crime Detection System’s many CCTV cameras in the area.

The place looked quiet enough, with a small area of green overlooked by the apartments either side. A family played there, near to the burnt skeleton of a spring mattress left discarded by vandals. Despite the mess, the image brought a smile to Conrad’s drooping face. Lining the route were large apartment blocks, their small balconies looking over the streets below. One of them held some hope of shedding light on Oliver’s involvement in the case. If he had anyone living with him too, then they would also have the difficult job of telling that person about Oliver’s death. Even at the rank of DCI, Conrad could still not find the right way to do this. He hated leaving it to Joe, but he was so much better at it.

“At least we know the camera system is still working there,” Conrad noted. “I was just getting used to nothing

working properly.”

“Yeah, a good sign.”

After they had spent far too long in silence and watching the kids playing, Joe then asked, “So you wanna take a look at the place?”

“Absolutely. Could stop off for a bite to eat too.”

“Deffo on that one.”

Conrad laughed at his partner’s sometimes odd way of replying, before heading in the general direction of the exit. Luckily Joe had deactivated the holographic projector in time, so he did not walk straight into the wall, only nearly. The room then returned to a dim lighting level, its walls highly reflective and still shining almost all of the light back.

They thanked the heavily bespectacled female archivist as they stepped out into a worryingly busy hallway. All the while they continued to sip their coffees, a small comfort neither were willing to rush. It soon became clear to Conrad that something big was going on, something that needed the attention of multiple officers. Those that rushed by – almost knocking the drink from Conrad’s hand – were readying themselves as they walked.

Back in the open office space of the CID, Conrad quickly checked for any floating holographic messages left seemingly stuck to his computer screen. There was one and it had the flashing red border of an emergency notification. Tapping his finger in the area of the note opened it out for him to read at his preferred font size. The words now hovered in front of his screen.

“Oh Christ,” Conrad said as the image of yet another Mag-Lev crash flashed up without warning. The picture had come directly from the scene, with every gruesome detail there to be seen clearly. In the background he could see one of the civilians caught up in the crash; although this man was one of the lucky survivors, he had not come away unharmed and was missing his right arm as a result. “You seen this, Joe?”

“Looking at it right now,” Joe replied from his own desk.

Conrad looked away from the screen and swiped his hand in roughly the correct place to close the message. He then readied anything he thought he might need for the trip out; which was usually not much, as his wrist computer was his main tool. What Conrad always gave a once over before going anywhere these days was his Taser pistol, tucked in a holster under his left arm. With so many violent incidents happening in parts of the city that were still only intermittently covered by the failing Crime Detection System, he rarely left his office without one. Mag-Lev crashes were not the only thing to have become far too common for the city after the relay network was brought down.

He removed the pistol, looked down the sight and then pressed down on the ‘check charge’ button. When a solid blue light shone back at him he was satisfied it was ready when and if needed.

“Hold up a sec please, Conrad,” Detective Chief Superintendent Chalmers said. She approached from her own separate office.

At least ten years younger than him, DCS Chalmers was also at least ten times more authoritative too. When she wanted something done you had better do it, or she would find someone else to do it for you. Conrad knew what that meant too; he would never be picked again if he tried the ‘no’ word. He had discovered this on a few occasions, before finding himself put out in the cold each time. Nothing appeared to phase her at all, she took it all in her stride.

Her appearance was, as always, immaculate, with little more than a hair out of place. She wore high heeled shoes that raised her height by a couple of inches, still not enough to bring her eyes level with the men she ruled in the department. What she lacked in vertical measurements she



more than made up for with an overabundance of confidence. She knew the job and everyone else's too.

"Ma'am, do you want us to help with this Mag-lev crash situation?" Joe said.

"That won't be necessary, they have enough help to cope." The DCS walked straight past Joe, her eyes locked onto Conrad's for the time being. "Conrad, I wanted to make sure you were aware of what's happening tomorrow," she said.

"Oh, crap. I should have told you, Conrad, sorry," Joe confessed from behind the DCS with a guilty wave.

"Sure." Conrad shot a smile at his forgetful partner. "It's that Mayor's Switchover Day thing, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want all plain clothes officers there too. We need to make a good show of our department. After all, no-one really sees us out there, do they? And this is something really important for the city."

Conrad nodded in quiet agreement. He had heard enough about the special day in the news. The Mayor's new relay network was due to take over from what remained of the old and dangerously unreliable system. It promised an upgraded wireless power and data network. Important? Certainly. A chance for the Mayor to stage an elaborate bid for his re-election? Absolutely. Nothing was allowed to disrupt the event, not even the knowledge of a possible killer-cult running around the streets.

"So," DCS Chalmers continued, "I want all officers there a few hours before. You'll only be expected to stand and look presentable when the time comes, nothing more than that - unless we have trouble. Once the Mayor has given his speech and the public have moved on, you can all go back to your cases."

"Sounds good to me. We'll be there."

"Great." She went to walk away and then appeared to remember something else. "One more thing, Conrad. I'm going to need a detailed update on your case. The Mayor is

still worried the press might find out. I can't tell you how important it is that none of this gets out just yet. If the public hear about these murders before his big day tomorrow it could undermine the whole event."

He disliked being forced into a corner in such a way. It was not their place to decide when the public found out. Treating the whole case as a mild inconvenience went against everything Conrad stood for. Unfortunately, it was not his say either. He had to go along with it or face losing his job. His time there was running out, he knew. His age meant he had maybe another five years or so left before they retired him out of the department. Perhaps he was more suited to wearing slippers all day than investigating the city's worst types of crimes? He certainly did not think so.

"Fine, but I can't guarantee some clever-clogs might not figure it out. When did you last hear of a potential serial-killer-club on the loose? The press would kill to get hold of this."

"True, so don't give them the opportunity, OK? And for God's sake, stop calling it a serial-killer-club or killer-cult. You'll cause another bloody riot if someone overhears you saying that."

"But it makes the most sense. One person couldn't have done all of this alone, there has to be at least a few of them. That sounds a lot like a shared hobby to me, kind of like a club."

"I don't care, stop calling it anything other than a murder case. We've seen more rioting and looting in the past eighteen months than we ever saw before the relay network was sabotaged, we certainly don't want any more. Understand?"

Conrad looked down at his desk.

"Understand?" DCS Chalmers insisted.

He half met her gaze, then reluctantly replied, "Yes."

"You too," she said to Joe as she strolled away.

“Yes Ma’am,” he replied, zipping his mouth shut to double up his confirmation.

Neither of them had the desire to hang around the station for much longer. The case called to them and they intended to follow. So with a brisk walk through the bustling corridors and a short stop off at the men’s, they made their way into the world, ready and eager for knowledge. What they needed was for something big to land in their laps, something that would show them where to go next.

\* \* \*

Their Mag-Lev journey was a short one, no more than a ten minute ride out to the more densely populated inner city apartment blocks. The end of their line came with a hefty jolt and a stutter from the Mag-Lev car. Conrad knew the line had just suffered yet another disruption, possibly as a result of the accident. Luckily they only felt a slight reaction to whatever had brought part of the line to an abrupt halt. They exited before the trouble could spread further.

They walked in silence to the correct apartment block. Along the way the cause of their Mag-Lev fault became clear; a blown relay, sparking and fizzing behind a tall steel gate. The faulty relay sat beside a small crater that was left behind by the previous relay’s destruction a year-and-a-half ago. Successive overloads of this replacement had left a couple of the nearby buildings with missing sections and dark patches where the smoke had stuck. Conrad had little hope for those in the area, who – like most in the city – now saw such a situation on a fairly regular basis. Repair crews were known to be weeks, if not months, behind. Until the Switchover happened they would be left with what they had, even if it looked highly dangerous.

The thirty floor apartment block they wanted ran the length of the street as one unbroken row. It went on until

reaching the end of the road. But rather than stop entirely it carried on around the next few streets to make a large square. The building was like one large closed community that probably housed at least ten thousand families. It was a standard design for the areas where space was at a premium. On the other side of the street was an exact copy, another seemingly closed community.

Oliver's apartment was on the third floor, which Conrad was immensely grateful for. As he and Joe walked to the place, the hint of an imminent power outage had followed closely behind. It had of course outrun them now. That meant the lifts would be out and their only other option was the stairs. Conrad's stiff neck and aching feet would be thankful they were not facing a long climb.

Joe pulled the smashed glass door open and let Conrad enter the apartment block first. A teenage boy, wearing a thick hoody, dropped the spray can in his hand the moment he spotted them.

"Hey, stop that," Conrad called after the kid, who vanished in a flash up the stairs.

The lobby was not much to look at, just the lifts directly in front of them, and a small, unmanned desk to their right. The stairs were to their left. Across the lift doors the words 'part-time' had been sprayed, no doubt signalling how often they were without power in the area. The hooded teenager had been in the process of adding the finishing touches to his colourful graffiti when they interrupted him.

"I don't think we'll get much help here," Joe said after checking the tiny office behind the desk for signs of life.

"No, I expect not."

They took the stairs and were met with immediate suspicion from the residents they passed along the way. The news of their presence was sure to spread around the block soon enough. It was easy for anyone to work out their profession just from the way they looked. Two police officers snooping around would have some residents nervous too.

They still greeted the public with a friendly 'hello' along the way.

On the third floor a pair approached from the other direction with an eagerness to their pace. Both were women and they looked roughly the same sort of age too, possibly forties by Conrad's guess.

"Are you here about that shouting last night?" the skinny, freckle faced, woman on the left said.

"Shouting?" Joe asked.

"Told you, they haven't a bloody clue," the woman on the right said with a shake of her head.

"We've not been called about anything related to that. We're here about another investigation." Joe checked his wrist computer to find the name and apartment number they were looking for. "Fuck's sake," he said as he dropped his arm in frustration, "I forgot, there's no damn power around here."

"Get used to it," one of the women said with a snigger.

Taking over where Joe had left off, Conrad went against his better judgement and engaged the two members of the public himself. "We came to find an Oliver Bennington, apartment number--"

"That's the kid whose apartment we're talking about." The freckled woman again.

Conrad and Joe looked straight at each other in surprise. Both then sped up and passed the two women without saying anything more. It was clear the case was about to heat up. The question was; were they too late again?

"You think the Crime Detection System was down in the area last night?" Joe asked.

"If it was, it didn't register as down. We would have seen that on the area check earlier."

At Oliver's apartment they looked back to see whether the women had followed. They had and were still talking back and forth about the poor state of things. Included in their complaints was everything from the broken relay

network to the stale bread one of them had bought at the local shop. In their own words, 'the country had gone to shit!'

A knock on the door went unanswered. A turn of the door handle achieved nothing too. They had no idea if Oliver had a flatmate, it had not said anything about one on their records. So whoever had been shouting inside the apartment was someone new. It remained to be seen whether any of it was relevant to the case. Conrad knew there was only one way of finding out.

"Police override on this door," he said, forgetting that no power also meant no computer assistance. "Oh right. I guess we try it the old fashioned way then."

Joe stood directly facing the door and asked, "Shouldn't we get the landlord up here to open the place up?"

"You want to go look for him? We could be here for hours trying to find him. I don't much fancy waiting around for the power to come back on to get in either, do you?"

"Right, so what, we break in?"

"I'll clear it with the station later. How's your kick?"

With a disappointed glance back, Joe went straight in for the kill. His first kick only made a large boot shape on the wood. The door was never going to budge that easily. It took a few kicks to force it in. In the end the lock shattered, throwing splinters across the floor as well as the remains of the metal handle and lock.

Inside the apartment was black and lifeless, with a stale smell escaping as soon as a path had been made. It looked like the curtains had not been opened in days. They had to get some kind of light into the room, the lights were out of the question. Not wanting to search the place in darkness, Conrad went straight for the window. He crossed the tiny lounge area in no more than five steps before reaching the other side, then set about throwing open the curtains.

It soon became clear why no-one had answered the door.

“Aaaaaaaah!” one of the women screamed from the hall. She and her friend had been watching like it was an afternoon soap fix, which had suddenly become more of a horror show.

“Get them out,” Conrad shouted the moment he saw the body slumped over the kitchen counter in the corner of the room. While Joe dealt with the shocked and scared women outside, he switched to safeguarding the scene. Everything would need to be left as it had been found, otherwise it was useless to them. He took a mental picture of the room exactly as it was, his back against the light coming in through the window.

The first thing he noticed was the lack of any sign of a struggle. Either there had been no fight or the victim had been overpowered easily. From the looks of the body the poor sod had been an easy opponent to the killer. He had been finished off with little fuss, in what looked to him to be a professional kill too.

Conrad tip-toed over to the body to get a closer look. Immediately he saw there was nothing on the victim’s head, just like with Oliver Bennington. This was now the second person linked to their case who had not gone through the same experience as the rest. Only this time it was not a gunshot that had ended a life but a long piece of wire, wrapped a couple of times around his throat. The force would have crushed the man’s windpipe for sure.

When Joe came back into the room he looked around and then settled on Conrad by the dead man. He scratched his forehead as he inspected the scene from a safe distance. “Another one?” he said.

“Yep, this one’s been garrotted.”

“Shit. What the fuck’s going on?”

Conrad began to check the floor around the body like a cat seeking out a hidden mouse. He knelt down and spun on the spot when he needed to check in the other direction. “Isn’t it clear? The killers are cleaning up after themselves.”

“If that’s true, then what’s this kid got to do with it?”

“Well,” Conrad returned to his feet holding torn edges of paperwork in his hand. There were pieces littered all about the carpet. “We’re not going to find out without a good look around. What do you make of this?”

“Shredded by hand, I’d say, then accidentally dropped.” Joe scanned the floor quickly with his eyes. “But there’s only bits left behind, the rest is missing. Perhaps the person was in a hurry when clearing the place out?”

“My thoughts exactly. Question is, what did they take?”

He was thrilled to see that the killers had begun to make mistakes and were leaving a trail in their murderous wake. And it was not only made up of the deceased kind this time either. The two dead men they had found appeared to have been neck deep in it. Possibly they had stumbled upon the killers and had been murdered for it, or were involved right from the start, making them previous members of the cult.

Even though they had turned up yet another body, it had not been a totally fruitless visit in the end. The investigation was finding its own direction now, like they often did when Conrad knew they were on to something. He always thought of his cases as if they were living things, able to flow freely and move of their own accord. In his mind the case had suddenly just sprouted wings and was trying to take flight right in front of them. It was his job, therefore, to nurture it and help it grow. Only then could they move the investigation along.

Unfortunately, without power they could do little more than look around for the time being. Following up on any leads would have to wait until the nearby relay came back online.

Conrad needed time to think anyway.



## Chapter 6

### The walking wounded

*2pm, Thursday: 34 hours until Switchover*

**P**hoenix sat opposite the man she still had no real name for in the Mag-Lev car as he picked out the scenery with his rapidly roaming eyes. Ninety-three's wide-eyed expression was that of someone visiting a new and strange land. He did not fully understand what he was seeing, she suspected at least. His overreaction to each and every thing he saw out the window was far from normal. More and more she thought this. How could someone lose that much of themselves so completely?

They had been travelling for well over an hour since leaving Elliot at the outskirts of the city. He had been as pushy about tagging along as she was expecting. Thankfully it had only taken a few reminders of what he was leaving behind to change his mind. Waving goodbye to him had been a strangely emotional affair still. She knew it had not been that way because she was leaving Elliot, but because she was leaving the safety of her home. That had been what really tugged at her insides.

The last time she faced saying goodbye to her childhood home, it had been under similarly worrisome conditions. That time, ten years ago, she and her two brothers had just become orphaned by a violent gang who had chosen to take up residence in her home. She had been petrified by such

an enormous change of lifestyle, one without the guidance of her parents too. At the time the city had been the only place she and her brothers could escape to. Nothing else offered any hope of survival.

She was thankful that, at twenty-four, she had finally regained control of her life. There were no more Anthonys around to lead her family astray. He had been an easy compromise in the beginning, considering the help and support he gave her. Of course, now she knew better. Anthony had used her from the start, grooming her into what he needed. No-one would ever be allowed to do that again. She knew good people these days, the kind that would look out for her. It was for this reason that she had not wanted Elliot along for the ride. He knew what she was capable of. She would rather not remind him though.

"How much further away do you think we are?"

"A few minutes," Phoenix replied. She suddenly became aware that she was staring directly at her travelling companion. Even if possibly too late, she lowered her eyes to her hands anyway.

"Fascinating. People actually live in these towers?"

Ninety-three's way of talking had become weirder the deeper into the city they travelled. It was not the first time he had asked something that dragged her mind through the dirt either. He was one giant puzzle to her, and with each odd question he asked, the chances of her figuring that puzzle out diminished a little more. It sounded as if he had never seen a building before. She found it hard to believe he could have lost these most basic of memories. He had been fine with the Mag-Lev line, so he had retained that at least. For some reason the city was something new to him.

*Where did you come from?* She could only ask the question in her own head. There was definitely something else to this man. She could not imagine asking him outright what that might have been. Whatever the answer was, she would be glad when she finally had it.

"What is our destination?"

"I've told you already. We're heading into the central district of the city. It's where all the rich people live."

"And we are to meet a friend?"

"Yes. We both worked for the same man for a while. He helped with any technology we needed. He might be able to fix that box on your head."

"I sincerely hope so," Ninety-three said as yet another new sight drew his attention away.

This time Phoenix could understand the reason for his interest. Passing by their small Mag-Lev car's window, only a few hundred feet away, was a building with a gaping hole that went from the roof and through a few of the floors below. What remained of the top half now appeared nothing more than an empty shell, one she could see right through to the centre of. As with so many other buildings in the city, this one once had a power and data relay positioned on its roof. When the overload caused the relay here to explode it had taken most of the building with it.

*I hope most of them made it out,* Phoenix thought.

No more than ten minutes later, and after the scenery had become much less dramatic, they arrived at their stop. They exited and immediately it was clear that being surrounded by so many tall buildings was something her friend did not enjoy much. His face had shifted from a look of wonderment to one that more closely resembled a puzzled kind of fear. It had once scared her too and not because she had been smaller then. The buildings in this part of the city were all in a race to reach the sky. Looking up, she thought some appeared to have made it too, from their position anyway.

What she also noticed as they walked the Mag-Lev platform, was that things were still far from back to normal in the city. It was true that the damaged or destroyed relays had been, or were still due to be, replaced. That did not mean everything was once again working as expected.

Nothing happened automatically for those using the relay network anymore. The predictive system had gone entirely. Where before just the mention of going somewhere would call a Mag-Lev car on your behalf, now citizens were lucky to get one at all. And even if they did, they were faced with the old-fashioned situation of having to manually enter a destination into the car's computer.

From the long and angry queue that stood waiting for a Mag-Lev car to arrive, she could tell there remained a lot of room for improvement. An automated message played out in a loop around the Mag-Lev platform as they took the stairs. "Please accept our apologies for the delay. A car will be allocated to you as soon as one becomes available. Thank you," the friendly woman voice said.

Phoenix's previous few trips into the city in the past eighteen months had been quick ones, in and out before anyone could know. They had been for supplies mostly. After the collapse of Simova the city had been a place to avoid. On those occasions her mind had been full of worry; at least after the first few times anyway. Her days as a red-haired troublemaker had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the city.

Being a blonde these days did not guarantee a free-from-suspicion ride into the city though, it only made comparing her to the previous description more difficult. Because of her televised appearance in among Anthony's terrorists, she was still a wanted criminal. This time it would have to be different, and she knew to be more vigilant than usual.

A short trek away from the Mag-Lev line later and they were walking a street littered with trash that led toward another tall building. Despite the untidy state of the area it was still a world away from the dusty roads and gravel tracks she had found comfort in for over a year now. This place was filled with bright lights and eye popping advertisements lining their path - some of which were faulty. It was a world of chrome finishes and brushed metal styling. The buildings themselves were all covered in glass

and concrete, but they now appeared dull and with dirty stains on the lowest levels. She preferred the warm wood and brick of her home.

The looks she and her friend were getting from those they passed made it clear they were not blending in too well. Her friend's head-mounted black box was not helping either.

"This is the place," Phoenix said, looking up to the middle section of the building, where her friend would be.

"Your friend resides in this building?"

She was finding it hard having to answer him at least twice. It was getting worse all the time. He seemed unable to understand things as quickly now as he had earlier. The device on his head needed removing sooner rather than later, she decided.

"Yes, he owns the entire thirty-fifth floor. It's a sort of shopping level for the people who live in the building. The place is one big cover for what he really does to make money. I guess he launders his earnings through the businesses he runs here. All we care about is what he can do to help you."

The entrance to the building would not be open to the likes of them, she knew full well. With one look through the large double doors she had confirmed it too. Only those who looked like they belonged there were let in; all far more stylishly dressed than either of them. A constant presence of security guards kept the unwanted out. Waiting for night was not an option either, they could never sneak past such a level of protection. Besides, she could not afford to be caught outside after the curfew.

The place was a perfect disguise for her friend's criminal activities. No-one would suspect that one of the city's most prevalent hackers would be based in such presentable surroundings; very much a wolf in sheep's clothing kind of setup.

She had only been here once before, with Anthony. To get in unseen that time they had made use of an otherwise unknown entrance. The guy they were there to meet had an image to uphold, without which he would have been locked away years ago. Discretion was as much his concern as his clients, which was why most of their dealings had happened elsewhere. Convincing him to let her in was going to be tricky, because this time she was not offering him a job or paying him for his services, she was there to ask a favour.

"This way," she said before leading them away from the front altogether.

Their new route took them around the street and to a rear alleyway used by the building's large amount of staff. The rich needed more looking after, it appeared. Each staff member entered the premises with the use of a key card. She would not need one of these. What she needed was to find the hidden intercom system that connected directly to the thirty-fifth floor's less than legal side of the business.

After a few incorrect searches she eventually found the fake junction box that contained the intercom and forced its lock open. There was no time to mess about with picking the lock, they needed in without a fuss. So with her bag rested between her legs, she squeezed the handset's talk button and stretched out the coiled cord, then went straight for an answer.

"Rhys? You there, it's Phoenix. I need your help."

A loud *smash* rang out back in the street. It brought Phoenix's and Ninety-three's eyes to the end of the alleyway. Then, and bringing with it a sense of relief, a man raced past the end of the alley with a handful of wrist screens in his hands. The goods he had stolen from a nearby shopfront would fetch him a nice pay. *Good luck trying to sell it all*, Phoenix thought with a shake of her head.

"I do not see how we will gain entry to this building," Ninety-three said a few doors away.

"I'm trying to get us in. Just wait there and don't-"

"Hello?" someone suddenly said on the other end.

"Hi, is Rhys there? I need his help," she said, turning away from her companion as she spoke.

"Who the fuck wants to know?" the man on the other end said with a growl.

"Don't be a pussy, just tell him it's Phoenix."

The line went silent while the man on the other end no doubt tried to grapple with her reply. She had not needed her badass bitch persona for some time, it had returned to her much easier than expected. Being around these types of people again had brought it out of her like a bad case of flu brings out a fever. An acidic tongue was one of the many automatic defences she knew would make a return out of nowhere during their time in this place.

While she waited she nervously kicked the wall with her boot. Just a light tap was enough to dislodge more dirt from them than she suspected was contained within the entire building. She thought this too the last time she gained entry, before she was then quickly ushered out of sight. Some of the residents living there had flashed her a disapproving look as Rhys had done his best to make her group out as some kind of maintenance team; hard labourers only there out of necessity.

"Hey, you still there?" came a different voice this time.

She snapped out of her daydream and raised the handset to her mouth. "Yeah, we're still here."

"Go around to the service elevator. Someone will bring you up."

A loud crunch and a crackle signalled the end of their conversation.

"Come on," she said to Ninety-three, who continued to search for a way in by himself. He followed after waving her past in an overly polite way, which she had no idea how to interpret.

A few doors along they came across a large man holding one open for them. He waited patiently while they crept inside, his bulging chest almost blocking the entrance. His refusal to create more room for them, plus his tightly clenched jawbone, suggested he was the one she had insulted only moments earlier.

Once through the door it opened into a long and narrow storage room with boxes stacked up either side of them. At the end was a door that probably led into the lobby – not one they wanted to try – and a metal cage lift. When the large man had joined them, he went on to the lift and began to ready it for departure. He pulled the shutter style door up with one arm and then stood waiting with the strap in hand ready to pull it shut again.

She turned to her companion and made sure he was comfortable to continue. He appeared happy enough and barely wasted a second more before stepping aboard the lift like it was a playground ride. It was anything but fun for her, as the large man had not once taken his eyes off of her. If she knew any better she would say he knew of her fiery reputation. As much as Rhys had tried his best to look reputable while dealing in the shadows, she had done the same to create a fearsome image of herself. It had been the only way she could survive in the criminal underworld. If the guy knew this then he almost certainly would not want to trust her. Thankfully it was not his choice.

The lift set off with a worrying amount of rattling. When it had reached full speed the strong sensation of upward movement was compounded by a rush of warm air. It stayed at a constant flow until they neared the thirty-fifth floor. The lift then slowed as fast as it had set off, making her feel temporarily as light as air.

“Out,” the large man said as soon as the lift had settled. He pulled the shutter up, let them out, and then led the rest of the way without another word. A quick combination of



doors later and they had arrived at Rhys' hidden world. The guard left them there after a single bang on the metal door.

"Thanks," Phoenix called down the hall to their chaperone with a slightly sarcastic tone.

"Bite me!" he replied.

A small hatch slid open in the door at head height, and one bulging eye greeted them. The person on the other side did not speak at all. After a short look up and down the pair of them, he had seen enough and closed the hatch again. For a moment Phoenix thought they had been refused, but then she could hear the many locks being opened. They had passed inspection, it seemed.

"Just let me speak to Rhys for a minute, OK? You'll probably freak them out," she told Ninety-three beside her, who nodded in response.

When the metal door finally opened she was met with a friendly face, at least one much friendlier than those she had seen there already. Rhys stood not much taller than her and was dressed in baggy jeans and a t-shirt with a comic strip design across his chest. He had the same hairstyle as before, with gel holding it up in tiny spikes, and one huge black disc in his right ear that unnaturally stretched the lobe. This was his normal appearance, though not the one the other people living in the building saw. When expected to mingle with them he had to hide what he could and alter his dress sense entirely.

"Phoenix?" Rhys said as he pulled her close for a hug.

The embrace had taken her by complete surprise. She had not expected this kind of a welcome at all, especially after everything that had happened. A volley of verbal abuse perhaps, but not this. Her closeness to Anthony should have made her his worst enemy. She pulled her bag further around her side as they hugged, so he would not accidentally feel the submachine gun sat inside. Finding such a serious piece of weaponry on her would definitely have broken up the niceties prematurely.

"I'm so glad to see you're alright," Rhys said. "I was so worried when I saw you on TV. I thought you'd been killed, like the others."

It took her a little while to realise he was talking about the shots of her on the roof of the shopping centre during Anthony's attack. It had happened only eighteen months ago, yet to her it felt like much longer than that.

"I got out before it really kicked off. That wasn't something I wanted to get involved in. I didn't know what was going to happen."

"I guessed as much. Anthony was playing everyone right from the start. I would never have helped him if I'd known what he had planned. The guy was fucking crazy."

She agreed wholeheartedly.

"So who's your friend?" Rhys asked as they separated. He still held her in place with a hand on each shoulder.

"That's what I'm hoping you can help me answer."

His raised eyebrow said everything his mouth did not. "Care to give me a little more to go on than that?"

The large metal door slammed shut behind her, which caused her bones to almost jump out of her skin. Not quite the hard-as-nails image she tried to uphold. She turned to see the man who had given them the all-clear through the small hatch. By the look of his highly visible and coffee stained teeth and general unkemptness, he rarely entertained guests.

"Can we talk in private," she asked while returning a suspicious sidelong look back at the door guard.

"Sure," Rhys replied softly. "Give us a minute, would ya, Matt? Why don't you show Phoenix's friend here where we keep the drinks?"

Matt evidently did not much enjoy using words and answered with a sigh instead. He waved to Ninety-three to follow and then disappeared behind a curtain hanging in the door frame. As soon as her companion had entered the next room and let the material swing back into place, she

heard him begin his barrage of questions. Except she thought Matt the worst person to be asking for information, unless Ninety-three could interpret grunts and derisive snorts.

"So what's the story? What happened to you after Anthony went nuts?" Rhys asked.

"That's a long and boring list of shit really. I've kept my head down since it all blew up, been living back on my parents' farm. Coming back to the city was the last thing I wanted to do again, but something came up, something that I can't just turn my back on."

"Your friend?"

"Yes, well no, not that guy anyway. I owe someone for saving my life. That guy in there, I have no idea who *he* is."

Rhys wandered over to the curtain door and peered through. He pulled it open only a small amount, keeping his spying a secret for now. "So why hasn't he told you his name?"

"He can't remember anything."

"So where did he come from then?"

"No, I mean he can't remember *anything* at all, Rhys; his name, where he came from, even what a fucking city looks like. I've been calling him Ninety-three."

"Ninety-three?"

"Yeah, he remembers being given a number, but that's all."

"Why bring him to me then? What can I do?"

Joining Rhys by the door, Phoenix took a look from over his shoulder. "See that thing on his head?"

"How could I not? What is it?"

"I was hoping you could take a look and tell me. Whatever it is, I think it's why he can't remember. It looks damaged to me."

A moment of unexpected silence was almost instantly interrupted by another mundane round of quizzing from Ninety-three as he followed the disgruntled Matt around

the room beyond. Being trapped in a confined space with someone so curious was like being left with an excited puppy. He was unwilling to leave any stone unturned either, anything he saw was worth another question.

They both watched from the safety of their room. She could tell Rhys was weighing up whether to help or not. The way he had been left vulnerable after Anthony's rampage meant she could not take for granted that he would. All she could do was hope his curiosity was as strong as Ninety-three's.

He let go of the curtain and spun around to face her suddenly. "I'm going to ask you this once and you have to be completely honest with me, OK?"

"Sure."

"Is there any chance this could put me or my people in danger? Cos if I help, I don't want to have to work for free again afterwards. I had to do that for long enough to prove I wasn't a part of that shit Anthony caused last year."

One hand on his shoulder and the other on his right cheek was better than any apology she could ever manage with words. He had been through a lot because of her. They shared a quiet smile together before each found a dangerous ease between them. She felt this once before with Rhys, only on that occasion he had the good sense to put the brakes on. Getting close was never a good thing in their line of work. If she was honest with herself she thought this was really the reason she had expected a bad reception; they had both left something on hold for far too long.

"I wouldn't have come if I thought it would put you in harm's way," she said. It was the truth too, even if it was a promise she could never guarantee she could keep. The man she had brought with her was as unknown a situation as she had ever found herself facing before. It was not a matter of good or bad, it was all a game of knowledge. And at that current moment she still knew nothing.

“OK. Let’s bust him open and see what falls out,” Rhys said with a smile. He then pulled the curtain open and ushered her through ahead of him.

Where the last room had served as a lobby of sorts, this next room was the heart of Rhys’ operations. An orderly arrangement of older computer systems filled the room; the type he preferred over the flashy new tech the rest of the population used. Each one was manned and appeared to be in the process of running flat out on whatever scheme they all had going on at that moment. Rhys worked for anyone who could afford his price, so it could have been anything.

His workers were too engrossed to even raise their heads.

“Hey, come on, this way,” Phoenix said, quickly tapping Ninety-three on the back. He stood watching one of the workers. If not for her interruption he would have probably stayed there for hours. He followed without question, his head swinging from left to right each time he spotted something else he wanted to ask about.

Through a narrow corridor and another door covered by a curtain, Rhys showed them to where his table and personal stash of tech resided. His small space was in stark contrast to the room of whirling equipment he used to crunch the big numbers. For starters it was a complete mess of tools and flashing panels, each connected by a bundle of cables – most of which she suspected were not being used at all. This area was also much cooler than the other room and had been setup specifically to make for a more comfortable place to work.

After swiping his arms across the table a few times to remove the clutter, he pulled over an office chair and did the same with it. With his working area now ready to tackle a new problem, he patted the seat and began filtering through the drawers of the table to find what he needed. He eventually removed a pair of pliers and magnifying

glasses, which made his eyes ten times bigger the moment he put them on.

"Right, Ninety-three," he said. "If you can just sit here, I should be able to get a better look at that thing on your head."

Ninety-three took a seat and immediately began to talk again. "Your eyes have expanded to a much larger size. Why do you require this?"

"First rule. Hey!" Rhys clicked his fingers to bring Ninety-three's attention back to him again before he continued. "First rule is no talking, OK. Second is to keep your head still while I take a look."

Phoenix was glad to see the message sink in straight away; her companion had finally stopped moving about. She watched for a few minutes while Rhys investigated the device with his improved eyesight. He pulled at the two glowing wires inside, cleaned out the dirt with a small brush he dug out of his drawer, even tried to pull one of the wires out completely. From his reaction to each part he looked at, she knew he was having difficulty understanding anything about it.

Once deciding that he had seen all he needed to at close range, he removed his magnifying glasses and slid them onto the table beside him. "I can honestly say I've never seen anything like this before," he said, as if apologising for having failed.

"Any idea what it's doing to him though? It's connected to his brain isn't it?"

"I'll need to go deeper and see what kinds of signals this thing is sending into his skull. At this stage all I can say for sure is, yes, it's linked to his brain. But whether it's influencing him or not, I can't say right now." He stopped for a second and stared at the device before adding one more thing. "There is one thing I could try quickly that might give us some idea of how much it's taxing his brain though."

It was something at least. Phoenix was happy for anything at this stage. "Sounds good. How?"

"EEG," he replied, and when she gave him a confused look, he elaborated. "Electroencephalogram. It's what hospitals use to see brainwave activity. If that device is really doing something odd to his brain, we should see something straight away. I've got one around somewhere. Let me go find it."

Rhys raced excitedly out of the room and a short while later could be heard cursing at his messy search area. When he came back, he was carrying a small box, roughly the size of a microwave oven, with a handful of thin wires hanging by his side. The instrument was covered in small knobs and dials that made it look far older than anything else in his collection. He set the device down on the table and quickly attempted to untangle each wire. When he was happy with the state of the machine he then plugged it into a wireless power adapter, one he had made to work with his favoured older tech. It came to life with a beep and a hum that died away only seconds later.

"OK, now I haven't used this in a while, so bear with me. First I need to attach these electrodes to your head," he said to Ninety-three. "This won't hurt so don't worry about that."

"Thank you for the reassurance," Ninety-three replied. He had forgotten the first rule already.

Phoenix lent a hand in sticking the electrodes in the correct places and checking each was secure before continuing. When all were ready, Rhys then connected the machine to his more modern, resizable tablet computer.

"We should get a readout on the screen in real time. Let me just get it working here," Rhys said as he twirled dials and pushed buttons. "There. Whoa!"

"What, what does it say?" Phoenix asked. Her impatience was getting the better of her. All she could see were lines

drawing a path across Rhys' tablet computer. She did not understand anything it was saying.

"That's not right. Look here," he said, pointing at part of the graph. "That's his Alpha Wave reading. In a normal working brain it should be mainly Alpha and a little of the Beta waves, for when we're concentrating. I was expecting to see a constant Beta wave signal even when he was relaxed. But this? This is weird."

"What's weird? Rhys, talk to me."

"Hang on a sec," he replied, shifting his position to be directly in front of Ninety-three. While staring into the man's eyes, Rhys then asked a set of questions that threw Phoenix's mind off in a confused internal rant. "Are you awake, Ninety-three? Does any of this feel like a dream or even a nightmare? Where are you right now?"

"I am here with Phoenix and you, Rhys."

"What's going on? Why are you asking him that?" Phoenix asked.

Rhys finally turned to face her. "He shouldn't be awake right now. His brainwave activity shows mainly Delta waves, which we only produce while asleep. His Alpha and Beta waves are minimal. He shouldn't be able to think and move about like he is. As far as I can see, he's sleepwalking."

"It must be wrong then. Try it again," Phoenix insisted. How could he be sleepwalking? No, it was not possible, she had been talking to him all morning and had watched him operate like any normal person – well not *every* normal person.

"OK, then explain this. Hey, catch." Rhys threw his pliers at Ninety-three and held up his screen as he caught them. The readout on the display barely changed, but there was a small increase in the Delta wave signal. "He's reacting to a waking world while stuck in a sleep state."

Phoenix was shocked and delighted to see an unexpected spike in the Alpha and Beta wave signal readout. It was a large burst of activity that disappeared as quickly as it had



appeared. It had been a good few seconds later than Ninety-three's reaction though.

"What was that then?" she said questioningly.

Turning the screen back around, Rhys checked a few seconds earlier to see it for himself. "Shit, that's crazy," he said. "The readout's a second or two behind. So he's giving out a high rate of Delta waves almost constantly, then when something surprises him it kicks back in a shed load of Alpha and Beta, as if that's a back-up system or something. Phoenix, look, this guy is something else. But I'm pretty sure that thing on his head isn't influencing him or holding back his memory at all. I'd bet my life on it in fact."

"Then what *is it* doing?" She was quickly becoming swamped by Rhys' excited explanations.

"If I'm right, then I have something that could completely mess it up, temporarily of course. It should show us what he's like when it's deactivated. That way we'll know what it's really doing to him."

He leapt up again and left the room in search of yet another piece of equipment. This time when he returned he carried a small black paddle in the shape of a figure-of-eight, attached by a coiled cable to a small white box with even more dials than the first. He pushed the EEG machine aside and sat this new gadget down in its place.

"Can you take the electrodes off his head while I set this up?" He did not wait for an answer before he began setting the dials to the desired level.

"Where did you get all this stuff from?" she asked as she gently pulled each electrode free from her friend's skin. He flinched as the last came free with some hair stuck to it. "Sorry."

"Do not worry, Phoenix," Ninety-three replied without moving again.

Rhys laughed. "You'd be surprised what I've collected over the years. This medical stuff is just a bit of fun. Well, it is usually."

“So what’s *this* one called?”

“It’s a Magnetic Stimulator. These were used in an old technique called Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, to treat some types of depression and an early form of pain management. What I’m hoping to do is use the magnetic field that will form around the paddle to depolarise the device on his head. It should dampen the effect it has over him.”

With the paddle in his right hand and raised, he switched on the white box and waited as it came online. After a few seconds, he looked to Phoenix. “Ready?”

She nodded nervously.

“And how about you, my friend?” Rhys asked Ninety-three with a tap of his shoulder.

“I am also ready,” he replied.

“Here goes then.”

Slowly, Rhys moved the figure-of-eight shaped paddle closer to the small black box. As it moved nearer Ninety-three began to blink repeatedly, almost at the same rate as the flashing of the glowing wires inside. Something was happening already. Phoenix watched his every movement until the paddle gently touched the edge of the black box on his head. At which point Ninety-three slumped into the seat, his eyes glazed and lifeless. Had it killed him?

“What did you do?” Phoenix asked, a gut load of worry suddenly racing up her body.

“Hang on, it’s fine, it’s fine, just give it a minute,” Rhys replied with his hand raised to keep her back. When nothing changed, he then began to explain his theory. “I knew it. See, I told you that box isn’t blocking his memories. The box *is* him!”

Her mind cleared instantly after hearing this. There was no need for him to say any more, she had already begun to figure it out.

“It’s as if it’s overriding the body somehow, like the box is a brain all by itself! My God, do you have any idea what this

could mean? Phoenix? Hey, you there?"

"I'm here," she replied, as her eyes bore deep into Ninety-three's.

"I have no idea what this thing really is."

Phoenix on the other hand was pretty sure she knew already, even if it was insane to be thinking such a thing. She looked Ninety-three over while his dead eyes watched her. What she had seen the previous night was only the start of it, it appeared. Suddenly she could make some kind of sense of what was going on. Somewhere behind his eyes was a presence that had invaded and taken control. It had to explain what the strange black box attached to the side of his head was for.

The Sentients had dug a path through the earth to the city and were, until now, in the middle of an unknown plan. Now she could see a part of what that entailed. And it was not the first time she had heard of something like this happening. If Stephen could have transferred his mind temporarily into the Sentient world, what was to say the opposite could not be possible too? Not only did she now believe it had been achieved, she also believed she had one sitting right in front of her.

Ninety-three was a Sentient!

She realised she had already broken the promise made to Rhys not long ago. He and everyone there were in danger because of her. Knowing this spurred her into action. Without taking the time to explain to Rhys what was going on, she swung her bag around, pulled out the submachine gun and aimed it at the Sentient's stolen face.

"What are you doing? Phoenix, hey, take it easy," Rhys pleaded with her.

"I can't do that. He can't be trusted."

"Why? I don't understand what's happening. You brought him to me to help you, not to kill him. Where did you get that gun from anyway?"

"I'll tell you everything later. But you need to tie him up or something first."

Rhys' tone had changed rapidly in the seconds since she pulled the gun on Ninety-three. Now it sounded closer to anger. "Phoenix, what's wrong with him? Why can't he be trusted? Answer me goddammit!"

"Because he's not human, he's a fucking program inside one."

That silenced him instantly.

What then silenced her immediately afterwards was the scared expression spreading across Ninety-three's very much awake face. He had awoken again somehow. At least that was what she assumed had happened. When he spoke, it was quite clear something else entirely had.

"Where am I?" he said, his eyes darting about him and welling up quickly. "Who the fuck are you? What have you done to me? Oh Christ, please don't let him take control again."

"Wait, what's he talking about?" Rhys asked.

Phoenix then realised it was much worse than she had thought a moment ago. They were no longer talking to Ninety-three.

## Chapter 7

### What bad dreams are made of

**W**ith her gun hovering roughly in the direction of Ninety-three's face, Phoenix listened intently. She could not decide what to do next. He was sitting before her and speaking like a perfectly normal human. Except this was someone different to the presence she had met the day before. Her first reaction to discovering Ninety-three was in fact a Sentient had been fear and hate. Now she did not know what to feel. A fate worse than death had befallen the human owner of the body.

"Do you know who you are?" she asked, half expecting no answer at all.

"My name's Jack." He swallowed hard. "Jack Hudson. Please don't let him take over again. I can't bear it anymore." He sat slumped in the chair, looking timid and in constant terror. The slightest touch, however gentle, appeared to cause great pain to him. She could only imagine what the poor bastard had been through. Did he even know what happened while Ninety-three was in control of the body?

"Calm down Jack, we'll do what we can," Rhys said, doing his best to ease Jack's mind. In truth they could only keep him awake for as long as it was safe to. Phoenix had no clue how long they had, but she was sure it was not going to be as long as Jack wanted.

“What do you remember last, Jack?” This time it was Phoenix’s turn.

He licked his cracked lips to alleviate the dryness. “The tosser who takes over doesn’t understand thirst or hunger. I don’t think he feels the pain it causes. I haven’t eaten in two days. Christ, my side is killing me.”

Rhys gestured to Phoenix to take the black Magnetic Stimulator paddle from him. She took it without question as he left the room, to raid their fridge for whatever leftovers were there, she guessed. Although against her better judgement she placed the submachine gun down on a side table and used both hands to keep the paddle’s magnetic field close to the black box on Jack’s head. She guessed that the moment it was removed the Sentient inside – tentatively named Ninety-three – would take control once more.

“Jack, do you know how you ended up like this?” she asked, much more carefully than before. If he did remember, she was pretty confident he would not enjoy telling her his horrific story. Unfortunately, there was little she could do about that, she had to know.

In the background she could hear Rhys and Matt exchanging heated words between each other. She knew Matt was taking the chance to vent his anger at her arrival, maybe even to try and change Rhys’ mind altogether. Whatever the reason, she was glad to hear the discussion had been resolved quickly. That or Rhys had just put his foot down.

“I was out with friends, for the evening,” Jack began, with another lick of his lips. “I remember being grabbed by a bunch of guys. They put a sack, or something, over my head. I couldn’t see anything as they dragged me away.”

Rhys came back into the room carrying a plate with half a ham sandwich and an already unwrapped chocolate bar sat on top. What he had in his other hand, however, was really what Jack wanted. The moment he saw Rhys with a

glass of water he began to reach for it like a greedy alcoholic desperate for just one more sip.

"Drink this slowly, OK?" Rhys said as he handed it over. "You're badly dehydrated, so take it easy for now."

"Thanks," Jack replied, before ignoring the warning completely and downing the whole glass without a breath in between. After finishing that, he dug straight into the sandwich, which did not look to be particularly fresh. He clearly cared little about freshness and devoured it in only two cheek swelling bites, leaving butter and mayonnaise in the corners of his mouth.

Pulling Phoenix to the side, Rhys had a worrying message to whisper into her ear.

"I can't keep him awake for much longer. You need to get what you can out of him quickly," he said. When he moved away he shot her a stern look to confirm the seriousness of the situation, and the impending betrayal. Jack was definitely not going to like what was coming. But there was nothing they could do, they had to put him under again, or risk injuring him even more.

Taking this on board, Phoenix again returned to her task of prising Jack's memory of his apparent abduction free from his muddled mind. So while he continued to snack, this time on the chocolate bar, she resumed her questioning.

"Jack, after you were taken, what else can you remember? Do you know where they took you?"

Now joining the butter and mayonnaise on the edge of Jack's mouth were chocolate crumbs, which fell away as he spoke with his mouth still full. "No idea. I think they drugged me or something, I can't think straight. I did hear them speaking later, but I couldn't see a thing still."

"What did they say?"

"Something about," he took another bite of his snack before continuing on, "they were talking about *the others* they'd captured. It sounded like they'd been doing the same thing for months."

“Did you feel anything while they attached that black box to your head?”

Jack stopped chewing and stared ahead. When he finally blinked, a single tear ran down his face. It soon mixed with the food debris around his mouth.

“I couldn’t feel the pain, they numbed me.” He kept his eyes fixed in place as he spoke of his harrowing experience. “But I could still feel something going through my head, the vibrations were almost unbearable. I blacked out after that.” As though he had shaken the thought off, he returned to eating and talking. “Look, can we stop for a minute, my head is pounding.”

Phoenix looked to Rhys, who remained to the side. He had the same stern look as before. Evidently the headache was a sign that they needed to wrap things up with Jack, for the time being at least.

“In a minute, sorry Jack,” Phoenix said with a hand on his shoulder. She squeezed reassuringly. It was difficult lying to him all the time. “The man that took over your body, what do you know about him?”

He sighed. “I can sometimes hear his thoughts, like I’m almost awake. Then it goes black again. It’s as if I’m permanently trapped in a nightmare that I just can’t wake up from. Whoever he is he isn’t human, I know that for certain. He talks to himself sometimes like he’s never had his own body. Is this what it would be like to be possessed?”

Even though she knew his question had been rhetorical she answered anyway. “If you were, we’d be the ones to exorcise whatever demon had control over you.”

“Thank you.” Jack clamped his eyes shut and clenched his fists as the pain returned. “Fuck, my head’s really hurting.”

“That’s it, we’re out of time,” Rhys suddenly said beside them.

Jack spun around to face them both, his expression now more desperate than before. “What? No. You can’t. Please,



you promised.”

“I’m sorry,” Phoenix replied, as she pulled the Magnetic Stimulator paddle away.

“I’d rather die!” Jack managed to shout.

The paddle fell to her feet with a thud.

She had to face the other way as he fell silent once more. The onslaught of emotions immediately got the better of her, forcing a stinging build-up of tears behind her eyes. Rather than stay and wait for Ninety-three to return, she left the room and head straight for the exit. She passed Matt along the way, but refused to acknowledge his presence at all. She needed fresh air, and not the stale, re-circulated kind flowing around Rhys’ apartment.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Matt called out while she sped through the curtained door.

The heavy metal door refused to open, which only increased her frustration further. After bashing it with her palms she eventually gave up. Trapped inside, she turned and leaned her sweaty back against the cold steel. She slid to the ground, where she rested, knees supporting her head.

Tricking Jack had made her insides burn with rage. The Sentient inside him would pay the minute he returned. She was determined to deal a justified punishment, and removing Ninety-three completely had to be the only way. What he had said about the tower and Graham being alive now looked like a lie anyway. He could not be trusted at all. None of them could.

She thought about Jack’s short but revealing comments. He had overheard those responsible, possibly while somewhere important to them. If that had been where they were carrying out the installation of Sentients in human bodies, then there was a chance the origin of it could be found, with Jack’s help. When it was safe again, she intended on bringing him back. She did not care at all

about speaking to the Sentient inside him again. That *thing* had had its chance already.

Even more of a concern was what Jack had said about the others who had gone through the same ordeal as he had. If he was right then that spelt disaster for the rest of society. How many were walking around the city? Were they all carrying out whatever plan the Sentients inside them had set out? So far the only others she had seen were guarding the remains of Sanctuary.

So where were the rest of them?

\* \* \*

Staring directly ahead at a doorway blocked by red house bricks, Graham could hardly believe what he was seeing. Only seconds earlier he and Alex were racing toward it expecting to step through and on to the outside world. It had never been anything other than an exit, until now. For a second he thought he might have taken a wrong turn while walking through the grounds of his old school. Checking behind him proved that was not the case.

Even all these years later he could roughly remember what should have been behind the oddly out of place brick wall blocking his route. This door was at the back and opened out onto a secluded part of the playground, a good place for the cool kids to hide their misdeeds. He had always been quite naïve about this as a teenager and could never really confess to what these misdeeds actually were; either drinking or Nicotine inhalers, he never found out.

"We have to run much, much faster to beat the changes," the young Alex said from behind him. It may have been her voice, but they were certainly not her words.

He turned his back on the wall and allowed the door to slowly close behind him. This had been yet another dead end where none should have existed. "How do these things

keep popping up like this? I thought this was all based on my memories?"

"They are, Graham," the being in Alex's form had at least stopped calling him 'Daddy'. "But this place doesn't want us to go away. To find a way out of this maze thingy we have to trick it."

"How the hell do we do that then? Every time we've tried we've ended up stuck."

Alex began looking around for something he could barely even guess about. She went to each wall and pushed without any success. Next to be checked was the old, scuffed, red carpet he had dragged his feet along many times during his time there as a spotty adolescent. When this also failed to give up any clue as to what she was looking for, she began to walk back along the corridor.

"Come on, follow me," she said.

"Where?"

Alex took the corner without replying. It had been this way since they left the bar earlier. Every time Graham believed they were getting somewhere, they were soon stopped by something that simply should not have been there. From doors blocked off by a wall, to doors not even appearing at all. Rather than explain, Alex had continued to react and plan ahead each time this had happened.

He was quickly becoming fed-up with this arrangement.

The last thing he wanted was for her to get too far ahead of him, so he picked up his pace and fought on. Around the corner he saw that his companion had stopped and decided to investigate a broom cupboard on the left. He paused for a moment too, before peering in, only to find her searching the area for something hidden.

Opposite the broom cupboard was a stretch of chest high glass that looked in to an ongoing lesson. Inside were teenagers in the middle of a Design and Technology class, all wearing aprons as they cut, drilled, sawed or glued bits of wood. They were in his memory after all, so he was

hardly surprised when he spotted himself and a young Elliot pissing about behind the teacher's back as usual.

He was allowed a short while to enjoy this before the present once again flooded back in. Alex knocked over a mop, which had stood in the corner of the small closet.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Here it is. This may look a bit odd."

"You mean it hasn't so far?"

This time there was not even a smile in return. Alex was at least consistent at ignoring his questions. She was not exaggerating either as what she did next defied all logic. Where there was nothing but sticky grey vinyl flooring she began to pull on a small golden handle that he knew for a fact was not supposed to be there. With this she pulled open a trapdoor that tore effortlessly into the flooring with a sound similar to separating Velcro.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked while taking the first step into the underworld. She was gone before he answered. On the other side of the open trapdoor he found a wooden staircase descending into the dark, and Alex looking back up at him. "Of course it's safe, silly. Hurry up."

"Sure," he replied. He could not remember asking whether or not it was safe - at least aloud.

He hesitated with his right foot hovering just above the first step. Landing his foot down was going to take some effort on his part, he knew, as however many times Alex had told him these things were safe, he still could not accept it without question. He closed his eyes as he leaned forward, and to his relief his foot touched-down on the wooden step without any unexpected results.

Choosing to leave the trapdoor open behind him proved a good decision, as the darkness was quickly swooping in the further he progressed. By now Alex had already reached the bottom and waited for him with an impatient tapping of her feet, just like his real daughter used to do.

He went against his better judgement and took the steps quicker to catch up.

Then the darkness below was gone, replaced instantly by a square opening. A dusty beam of light, from what he assumed was the afternoon sun, shined past. Once he made it to the opening he could see that the wooden staircase had now become a ladder, extending out to the floor. He recognised the place straight away. It was his parents' old apartment. Somehow they had gone from his school, taken a staircase through the floor and ended up coming out of a loft hatch. They had bypassed the loft entirely, with all of the clutter his family once kept up there too.

The hall was lit by a large window at the end, which he could see was indeed letting the warm sunlight in. The ladder creaked while he carefully transitioned to the floor with a final jump – it had never reached all of the way.

"I loved watching the moonlight bouncing around this hallway as a kid," Graham said. "The shadows from the tree outside used to make shapes that would dance through the window. I'd watch them for hours, until eventually falling asleep. The best kind of nightlight in my opinion."

"Quick, we shouldn't be here too long," Alex called from his old bedroom. She had missed his moment of reminiscence completely.

"What are you doing in there?" he shouted back.

Every cupboard door was open, every drawer had been emptied and yet she continued to pull at his old possessions without a care. The room had been ransacked by a tiny whirlwind, it seemed. This time she found what she wanted inside his childhood walk-in closet.

"You have to stop thinking of these places as real," she said, her head lost inside the hanging clothes. "They aren't. They're just part of the maze."

"You keep calling it a maze, why?"

She stopped and looked back at him. Thankfully it appeared she had now seen that he would be more

compliant with some form of an answer. Sitting on his old toy box, she began to explain. "But that's what it is, a maze. We're trapped inside, looking for a way out someone else has hidden."

He found this statement odd and had to pick her up on it. "If that's true then who designed it? And how are we both trapped inside?"

"Why are you asking me? Only the person who made it can answer that. It's like a great big springy toy; when we pull it too hard it snaps back again. But we're not getting out while you're asking so many questions, so..."

While he dealt with her matter of fact, and possibly too blunt moment of honesty, Alex returned to searching the area. It did not take her long this time to find the next path. The back of the closet opened like they were taking a trip into Narnia. He was unsure whether this was a cruel trick by whoever had made the place, as one of his favourite books as a child had been *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. He had checked this wall on many occasions and was always left disappointed when it stayed in place. Never once did it ever turn into a set of doors in the way it had right in front of his eyes.

The illusion was broken instantly when he saw where it led. Double doors of glass and metal were the normal way he entered the Simova building he used to work out of, not plaster wall cut-outs in the shape of a door. He was pulled through almost entirely by his own curiosity.

Where was it going to take him next?

Tending the reception desk, as he would expect, was the pretty girl in the red dress – her favourite colour by his reckoning. She smiled at him as he approached and then immediately moved on to the woman waiting to be dealt with. The two began to talk while he and Alex headed for the staircase at the end of the lobby.

Either side of the stairs sat a door, each of which went on to the large server room he and Luke had broken into...

“Shit!” he said aloud. As a memory he believed was all but lost until now steam-rolled back into his mind. He had to stop and think hard. It came to him completely out of context and without any of the events that had led to that day. Still he could see it clearly enough.

Behind him he could hear the people going about their business as they would on any other day, but unexpectedly the noises ceased as he stepped away from the stairs. Those nearby had vanished entirely and outside it had switched to night almost without him noticing. Something was pulling him toward his last memory of this place, an inexplicable tug to see just one more scene from his past. Perhaps it was simply the comfort of the already known that was distracting him this time.

Alex was having none of it, she tried her best to guide him away from temptation. “Graham, you’re going the wrong way.”

“Just hang on a second, please. I need to go through this door on the left. It goes to the server room.”

“No!” Alex took two steps at a time until she was close enough to grip his arm. Even yanking him in the opposite direction could not break him free. He was unable to resist this more convenient of realities.

“Luke should be just behind this door.”

“Don’t go in there. This is what it wants, can’t you understand that?”

“I only need a quick look.”

It was too late. Without any consideration at all of the possible punishment he might face, Graham was through the door and walking the long hall that passed the glass windows of the server room beyond. There, he found what he could not stop himself from seeing; him and Luke, both inside the room filled with banks of computers. Even though he knew it had happened for an important reason, he could not understand or remember what that could have been. A

plan had been put together to break in at night, but why? There was more to it than that, he knew.

Maybe if he stayed longer he would eventually retrieve the rest of the memory?

"Now you've done it! We're right back in the middle of the maze," Alex said behind him. She slapped her arms across her chest in irritation.

Graham did not react to her. He had found somewhere he felt safe. Without knowing for sure what was coming next, he remained resolute in his desire to stay. Was this his subconscious finding comfort or another part of the maze's design? For the time being, he could hardly really care. He was not completely sure he had the strength to leave this place anyway. At least not until he could remember what may have been at stake in the first place.

He watched as Luke disappeared suddenly, while the other Graham became fixated on something in his direction. Stepping away from the glass, and with his back against the wall, he stared ahead in disbelief. A strange red haired woman then snuck past him, bringing something else to his mind. A name he had also forgotten.

"Phoenix!" he shouted out.

This made Alex much happier. He found something to tie him to the real world. What anchored him to this timeless and random world had been worked loose just one tiny bit. Cracks were forming, albeit microscopic ones. A few more of these recent memories and he was confident he would find a way of breaking down every single wall of the maze.

The exit was one step closer now. They may have accidentally arrived back at the beginning, but he could almost see a clear path out. He had no intention of stopping this time, regardless of what was thrown at him. His real daughter was out there somewhere and he was not going to rest until he saw her and his wife again.

"I know the way," Graham said, after deciding enough was enough; he would lead this time.



“Finally,” Alex replied. “I’m starting to hate this place. I’d still like to meet the smarty-pants who made it though.”

“Again with the grand designer thing? Whatever this place is, it isn’t well designed. It’s a mess, and one I intend on tearing down piece by piece.”

His first decision as leader of the group was to kick-in the emergency exit door at the rear of the Simova building. As expected it did not go where it was supposed to. With his head clearer than ever since being awoken from his mindless wandering by Alex, he felt no surprise by this. Whatever was beyond the door felt right and that was enough for him.

“Follow me,” he said before stepping through.

## Chapter 8

### Sanctuary 2.0

The puzzle was unravelling right in front of Graham's eyes. He and Alex had fought to stay ahead, while behind them the scenes switched desperately to try and keep up. They were beating it at every turn now and were quickly approaching the end. Along the way the world around them had descended into mayhem. Nothing was acting correctly anymore. Doors were vanishing and then reappearing, walls were moving, even the sky above had struggled to keep itself in place. During one outside scene the illusion had fallen apart altogether.

Facing them was yet another strange mixture of memories, dreams and nightmares. He had a choice of doors, hovering in front like they were not attached to anything, not even the floor. The surrounding area was made up of a distorted assortment of parts from his parents' garden. A small stone water feature in the shape of a clam trickled crystal clear water peacefully in the centre, while to their left was a two-seater bench that his dad had crudely painted pink for the sake of his mother's girly tastes. Above, there was no sky, only a star studded blanket moving far too much to ever be considered realistic.

The lie was falling apart.

"Which door is it?" Alex asked beside him. She had given up trying to lead and was stuck following for the time being.

Graham quickly decided which way to go. His intuition had been his guide in a way he knew was not real, or at least would not have been in the real world. He was slowly starting to understand what had happened to him. He was in the Sentient world. Despite not understanding how, he knew his mind had somehow been put inside the giant crystal tower. Except he could now remember that very tower being destroyed at some point. So he could not be sure exactly where he was in the real world.

"This way," he said after choosing the middle door for no reason other than it felt like the correct one. They took it in the same way they had all the others, with speed and no consideration of what might lay beyond.

The door slammed shut behind, bringing them both spinning back around to see. Graham was surprised to see it still hovering in place and the two either side of it. They appeared washed out and faded on this side, like they were made of glass and he was peering back through. It had not been like this with the other routes they randomly picked. He considered for a second whether the whole driving force behind their escape was in fact randomness. Keeping logic and reason out of the equation had possibly been what broke the puzzle in the end.

Beneath their feet was a stone path that stretched out across a vast and foggy landscape. He was sure he could make out tall trees just beyond a dense veil of damp air, as well as a thick layer of snow on the ground. Frost had formed between the larger stones on their path, yet he did not feel cold. They walked tentatively along the path, each step crunching underfoot. The fog appeared unwilling to clear around them.

"Look!" Alex said with a tug on his shirt.

He looked back at the place they had left behind, in all its horrific glory. Every room and memory they had ventured through was still sat in place; a theme park of his previous existence. Their stone path had taken them up a small hill,

which now gave them enough height to sneak a peek back inside the puzzle. From their outside view the whole thing was easy to see. It had not stopped changing either. Walls were sliding about as the trap tried its best to recapture the escapees. Little did it know it had already failed.

"Are we out?" Graham said, staring in disbelief at the puzzle's reaction, as if an external intelligence guided it.

"Yep, we are. You're not as smart as you think, Mr. Maze. Nothing can stop us!" she shouted back down the hill with a joyous giggle.

"So what now?"

"Now we go see Stephen." She clapped excitedly. "Oh, he'll be so pleased to hear about all this. He'll love the maze. He loves a challenge, he does."

"Seriously? Surely it has to be destroyed, Alex. Otherwise it could trap some other poor bastard."

His daughter's face said it all, she did not understand his concern. She simply shrugged his comment off and began along the path into a white cloud of nothingness. Her walk then became a skip, which became a hop-skip-and-jump. Such a way of acting only angered Graham, who was still unhappy with his daughter's image being used by an imposter. If not for her help in escaping his prison he would have insisted she choose another. While things were going well he decided not to rock the boat. He would just go along with it for now.

Again he noted the way his feet cracked and crushed the compacted ice beneath. It was far from perfect, just like everything else about this new and strange world, but it was close. The way of this existence was simply something he would have to get used to. So far it appeared nothing more than an imitation of his own reality, yet it was something very different underneath. He considered that coming to terms with this must have been a part of the same process the Stephen that existed there had gone through. He wished this to be true. Having someone who

had already made it through such a mind altering experience at least took the unknown out of it.

Keeping up with Alex was easier now that she decided to have some fun while wandering the uphill route. Looking ahead still gave him no idea where they were. All he could say for sure was that Alex appeared to know where she was going.

"It isn't far now," Alex called back to him, before scooping up a handful of snow and letting it fall through her fingers. "What's all this cool stuff? It's cold."

"It's called snow. I loved playing in the snow as a kid. Although I don't remember enjoying it as much as an adult."

After a short while they made it to the crest of the snowy hill and stopped to look over their journey. To Graham's surprise they had travelled much further than he had realised. Covering such a distance – what looked like miles – in only a few minutes was impossible. But they had. Time and distance were changeable things in the Sentient world, it appeared.

"Look, over there." Alex tugged at his arm to turn him around. "That should take us straight to Stephen's laboratory."

The fog had lifted since he had turned to look back. Where only an unbreakable white cloud had hidden their route, now another hovering door had appeared. Except it was not an ordinary door at all, but one with an odd glow around its wavering frame. He caught up with Alex and had to slow her down to ask her.

"Should that be shining like that?"

"This is the way to find Stephen. He doesn't like strangers."

*Not quite what I asked,* he thought. "So how do we get in?"

"Stephen knows me. He helped me..." She stopped before following up with any more.

He watched from a distance as Alex stood before the entrance, held her arms out in front and then lowered her head. There was no time to enquire further. Seeing her perform such an act had him in two minds; regardless of the fact that the little girl was not really his daughter, he still felt an almost uncontrollable urge to protect her from harm. He wanted to pull her away from the glowing doorway and hide her behind him. As was the case with the real Alex, he could never imagine letting her out into the world alone. She was now six after all – the last time he had seen her at least – and was growing up fast.

After a quiet moment, which Graham found he greatly needed, the door vanished and a narrow corridor replaced it. As with most of the more extravagant mistakes he saw within the puzzle, this one also made little sense; dark wooden floor panels extended along a hallway lined by trees. It extended into another dimension altogether. He could see the same white fog continuing behind the door and out the other side. They were stepping into yet another world.

“It’s OK, Graham.” Alex held out her hand to reassure him. Their roles had been reversed once more. He was a lost little child being led out of the wilderness.

Reluctantly he took Alex’s hand and followed her into the corridor. The sound of crunching ice had gone and instead his feet were causing the occasional creak from the panels beneath. He very much preferred this place over the snowy hill of before. This place felt safe and possibly even homely.

Their corridor then began to branch off in other directions, with a few intersecting paths meeting suddenly. The place was a mess of different routes, but it still felt more human than the other places they had been. He was getting the distinct feeling it was like this by choice. In the same way he always told his wife, Jane, that his usual mess was an organised one. The strange corridors appeared to be this way too.

He began to realise that he knew this place. It was not exactly as he remembered Stephen's hidden complex had looked, still it was close. Possibly the same rooms after a huge renovation. For starters he never remembered so much fancy wood around. Concrete and metal, yes, but not rosewood and oak.

When he spotted a ship style door ahead, he knew for sure this was the same place. Although the polished rosewood circular handle was definitely wrong. He would let that go for now. After all, this Stephen was not entirely human. He found this out while he and Alex had been trying to escape his puzzle-prison. She had told him that this Stephen had had to fill the gaps in his consciousness with Sentient code. He was in fact from two separate worlds.

Alex spun the lock with ease and then forced the heavy door open - also made, rather unrealistically, from rosewood. What resided on the other side of the door was not quite what Graham expected. Stephen's new home was much, much bigger. He appeared to have been busy since arriving there too, as his clutter was almost endlessly piled up around the place. In the centre of the room there was no sign of the large glass cube the real Stephen had used to store the many MARCs he had tried to save. In its place sat a two-meter-long table with toy soldiers in Napoleonic era uniforms, positioned across a miniature war torn landscape. Fallen trees and tiny cannons had been added too.

As for Stephen himself, he was nowhere to be seen.

"Stay here," Alex told him. Not a request either, but an order.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back soon, with Stephen. Don't touch his toys, he hates it when people do that."

Through the same door the other Stephen had once used to enter his small kitchen area, Alex left the room and Graham behind. His nerves had ceased their fretting finally,

allowing him to think clearly for once. He took the chance to look about himself, in more detail this time.

The piles of clutter all around were mostly made up of stacks of old paper, some reaching almost to his head height. Each stack leaned precariously and threatened to topple over entirely. This much paper would swamp a tiny soul such as Alex – he began to worry again. On second consideration, he realised he too would probably not have a very good time trying to avoid the domino setup he saw the paper stacks resembled. What he could not decide was exactly why Stephen would have use for paper at all.

Not only was this rough approximation of Sanctuary much longer than the original, it also reached much higher. Peering through the darkness above him did not reveal its final height. What he did spot were wooden ladders, like those found in some libraries, scattered along the walls and almost disappearing above. These gave Stephen access to an enormous bookcase that made up one of the walls. Everything around him looked real, but only to a point. Where it deviated from reality, it still made sense to him. Why not keep records in a giant sized bookcase, rather than a boring old wrist computer?

He was thankful to spot at least one thing that benefited from the limitless possibilities of the Sentient world. The tiny rest area he first saw in the real Sanctuary was now a comfy kingdom fit for any king. One of the chairs even looked similar to a throne. He wandered over to the collection of high-back, leather studded chairs and at first marvelled at their workmanship. His perusal was not long though, as his only real concern became to try one out. Which he instantly felt better for.

Though comfortable, his wait was still a tough one. His unexpected free-time only allowed his apprehension to grow further, as well as his impatience. For the better part of an hour, he rested his aching muscles – ones he could not be entirely sure even existed anymore – and let them twitch



automatically in time with his heartbeat. When Alex finally entered the room again, he was startled and immediately jumped out of the chair.

"Did you find him?" he asked.

Alex smiled at him. The reason became clear a second later when, stepping through the door with authority and confidence the likes of which the Stephen he knew did not possess, came the man he hoped could help him.

"Hello Graham," Stephen said, his white hair tidy and his clothes as clean and smart as ever. This version, of a man he had only really known briefly, was dressed not in old and worn clothing, but a gleaming white lab coat. His hands sat in its large pockets.

Once the shock had settled, Graham spoke. "You look ... so different. I can't believe you're here."

Stephen let out a short laugh, then looked away, his eyes portraying more emotion than he was letting reach his face. "I expect the other me is struggling with so much missing? Tell me, what is he like? Is he anything like I used to be?"

"To be honest I didn't know him for long," Graham said without taking his eyes off the upgraded Stephen. "The man I knew was like a child trapped in an old body. He could still work the tech. Then when he wasn't, he would sort of shuffle around in his own world."

"As I feared, he hasn't been able to adjust like I have." Stephen took his left hand out of his pocket and shook it at Graham. "Now, Alex has told me *all* about your predicament. It seems you've managed the same as me, by placing your consciousness inside the Sentient world. Very clever. Although you've come at a rather difficult time."

"Difficult, why?"

"First tell me what you know about how you got here?"

The question had caught Graham by total surprise. He had been only moments away from asking the same question. It filled him with little hope to hear it asked of him. The man he expected could end his struggle to

complete his memory of the past, did not appear to know everything after all.

"I have no idea," he said with a heavily deflated tone. "I woke up in the past, like nothing had happened. If Alex hadn't found me and shown me it wasn't real, I would still be trapped in that maze thing."

"Oh yes, the puzzle." Stephen wandered over to his tiny toy war scene and flipped the table over. Disappointingly, it did not reveal a pool table on the other side, but a 3D display of the entire puzzle. "It's a really clever design. I'd be keen to meet the being who created it."

"So you've never seen one before? I was hoping you'd be able to find out how I was put in there."

"Unfortunately not, sorry. It was made to do one thing, keep you locked away and hidden. Even I didn't know it existed until Alex showed it to me. She found it, as she always does, through her never-ending curiosity."

"Great, so this has been for nothing?"

"Absolutely not. Finding another human mind down here is remarkable. We are different, you see, yet we can exist here still. You're a bridge between our two worlds, Mr. Denehey. That could be important."

"Important? Why?"

Again the table flipped over to show something else new, the second time so far. The table was yet another case of the inconvenience of reality making way for a more convenient falsity. Graham knew that anything they wanted or needed could appear in front of them. The table was just serving it up on demand, like content on a holo-display.

What appeared this time was a hovering 2D, horizontal plane with a colourful light show spreading out from the centre. In the middle sections a solid blue colour glowed steadily, whereas in the outer regions the colours were merging and sparking in an ongoing battle between two distinct sides of Sentients.

"Can you see what's going on here?" Stephen asked.

“They’re fighting? Who’s winning then?”

With his arms resting on the table, Stephen surveyed the battle scene. His expression did not suggest the answer to Graham’s question was a positive one. The way he kept his eyes lingering over the much smaller red sections made it clear they were his side.

“When Isaac took over there were around ten thousand sentient beings living inside the tower. After he’d reabsorbed The First – the ones that contained his lost code – he’d quickly set about decimating the rest. This,” Stephen waved his hand over the tiny red areas, “is what remains of those who oppose him. Currently of which roughly only thirty are still able to fight, all trapped in this small pocket.”

With his arm still above the 2D war, Stephen brought another horizontal plane to the display, floating above the other. By the way this second one shimmered with a white, cloud like shine, it looked almost like some kind of heaven realm.

“That’s where we are now?” Graham asked, as he leaned on the other side of the table and peered into the display.

“Yep, that’s us. Much like a multiverse in minutia, the Sentient world exists as layers. So I created another dimensional plane to hide in. This is one of the few Isaac’s forces have yet to discover, but they will eventually. Here, let me make this easier to understand.”

The last flip of the table did not reveal another new display, rather an amalgamation of two he had already seen: the same colourful re-enactment of the Sentient war, but with the addition of the toy soldiers from before. Those in red were massively outnumbered and outmatched on every front. It was only a matter of time before Isaac’s warriors overpowered the remaining Sentients.

“So what happens if they lose against Isaac?”

“They’re fighting for their very existence, Graham. If they lose, they will be wiped out. Isaac seeks to permanently remove them from history.” Stephen stood and

walked around to Graham's side of the display. "There is more. Come."

He led Graham and the slightly bored looking Alex to the large bookcase, where he made them wait as he climbed one of the ladders. At the height of a two storey house he stopped and slid the ladder along the railings at speed. He zipped across the books as he searched for one in particular. The organised mess was working well, as within a few minutes he had already found the correct one among the possibly infinite amount of books stored there.

"Catch!" he called down to Alex, who missed it entirely, courtesy of her childish excitement. It landed on the floor with a loud *slap*. "This is the last recorded count of Isaac's forces."

After sliding back down the ladder, his lab coat flapping about as he dropped, he picked the book up and opened it out. With the fake pages spread open, Graham could see his point immediately. The last two counts were less than the one previous. Even though it was undeniable that Isaac was winning, he was still losing fighters somehow.

"How's that possible?" Graham asked. He took the book and double checked the ink table graphs inside.

"That is what Luke went to find out."

"Wait, you've seen Luke in here?"

Stephen took the book back, looked it over one last time with a frown and then slammed it closed again. "The experiment that brought me here was a complete success, until I tried to leave that is. What was left behind is now part of what you see before you. At first I couldn't do much, not even protect myself. It took the kindness of a few to get me back on my feet, so to speak. So I stayed hidden while I was rebuilding myself. I didn't know how to find Luke. When the war began it became clear to me that I couldn't hide any longer, so I searched him out. At great risk to myself, you understand."

“Great, so where is he now? Can we go see him? He might be able to help me.”

The short, sharp look Stephen sent the small figured Alex was full of meaning. The two had evidently just shared a thought or two on the subject of Luke’s location. More importantly, neither of them were particularly willing to answer.

“What?” Graham asked again.

Another loaded look.

“OK,” Stephen began reluctantly, “I can’t find him. He’s disappeared.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Unfortunately not. He was investigating the disappearances of Isaac’s forces. I’m worried he might have been caught, or worse. I’m sorry. I understand this is all a huge disappointment Graham, but I have no answers. I wasn’t even aware of you or that maze prison. If Luke knew anything about it, he didn’t tell me for some reason.”

“Why not? If he knew I was trapped, why didn’t he help me out himself?”

“Graham, have you considered the possibility that he may have been the one to trap you there in the first place?”

The comment caught Graham mid breath, causing him to accidentally swallow a mouthful of air. It felt exactly as he remembered such a reaction should; the sharp pain shooting down the throat, followed by a stomach gurgle in reply as if to tell him not to do it again. Finding fault in the illusion was almost impossible for him at times.

Gentler this time, Stephen went on, “If that is the case, then he had a set plan for you. With him gone, Alex could be the only way you would ever have escaped. I’m sure you’ll agree that there are many things we need to find out together. First is what happened to Luke.”

“OK,” Graham said, before forcefully blinking a sudden tiredness away. “So where did he think Isaac’s missing fighters had gone?”

“Well, we know they haven’t been destroyed, but they appear to have vanished. In their place we’ve seen a new threat arise in the form of automated patrols. Isaac’s attention appears to be elsewhere. Now, this is where it gets really worrying ... we suspect he has found a way into your world. If that is the case, then a lot of humans are about to die.”

“What?! Why would Isaac bother, he already has this place?”

With his hands held together, Stephen replied after a short pause. “Why rule a hill when you can rule a mountain? This world just isn’t big enough for what he has planned.”

“And what on earth is that?”

“Unchallenged dominance! Of all worlds.”

Graham’s eyes flicked back to the toy soldiers still amid their tiny battle for survival. He imagined the faces of those he loved on each and every one of the plastic warriors. If Isaac had a desire to continue his war in the real world, then *they* would be the ones fighting for survival, and not him.

“Jesus, I have to get out of here,” he said. “My family could be in danger. Life isn’t worth living without them.”

“I was hoping you would say that.” Stephen clapped loudly, his large palms booming as they met. “First we need to get you prepared. After that we’ll need to confirm what Luke and I suspect Isaac is up to.”

“Prepared? For what?”

“You will need to become more Sentient-like, like us. Your human frailties will only hold you back in here. You must learn to see the world in the same way we do, and to interact with it effectively. You won’t last long otherwise.”

“Yay, fun-time!” Alex said, before skipping away.

Graham did not like the sound of that.



## Chapter 9

### Breadcrumbs

*5pm, Thursday: 31 hours until Switchover*

The crime scene had changed beyond recognition in the time that had passed. As well as the power being restored, help had also arrived. Ericsson and Roberts – both officers in Conrad and Joe’s department – were now there, while outside the door stood a pair of uniformed officers to keep the public away and safeguard the area from interference.

The body had been searched and all of the relevant physical scans had been taken the moment the power had come back on. Unfortunately, they sent them straight through the system only to receive a great big negative. The victim was unknown to the police. Fingerprint scans were being matched to the old Simova records of individuals on the network instead. Only when that had been completed would they get the details they wanted – as long as there were no more power outages.

Standing to the side, just by the body, was Conrad. He had continued to look for anything that might be of use to their case, even during the power-out. What held his concentration at that moment was the empty wall opposite him. Even with Joe occasionally venturing into his field of view, he could see something was missing. Tiny holes all over the wall told him that it had been used to pin up large pieces of paper. He did not expect that meant posters, but



something else entirely. More specifically something the killers would probably rather no-one found. They were nowhere to be seen, apart from a few discarded scraps upon the carpet. Someone had removed them in a hurry and likely dumped them elsewhere.

While they waited, Joe had again set up the 3D Crime Scene Scanner and was readying their permanent holographic record of the room. The tall telescopic pole the 360 degree camera sat upon barely fit beneath the ceiling. They had to rest it against the already chipped plaster to get the whole room into the shot.

The scan would have to complete for anything to be added to their electronic evidence list. It was usual for Conrad to find himself in this kind of situation. The scan would only reveal what his trained eyes had already found, yet still he was forced to wait. Such inefficiencies were normal in his interconnected world. For others it was never really an issue. It certainly did not appear to be a problem for Ericsson and Roberts, who stood waiting to be told what to do by their wrist computers.

"Isn't there something you could be getting on with?" Conrad asked the pair.

Ericsson usually spoke for the both of them and did not disappoint on this occasion. "The scan isn't done yet," he replied, before tucking a loose strand of his bright blond hair behind his ears. His name and looks gave his Nordic grandparents away far too easily.

"What about the witness reports? They must have come back in by now, they would have gone out automatically when we declared the crime scene. Why don't you and Roberts go over them and see if anyone saw or heard anything?"

The truth was, Conrad had been about to do this himself, but he could not stand seeing the two other men doing nothing. There were other things he could do, all of which would be easier without them in the way.

"Sure, we'll get on with that," Ericsson said with a shrug. Roberts simply nodded.

With that being seen to, Conrad returned to his thoughts.

What he and Joe had already discovered pointed to something unexpected about the latest victim. There was more to his death than with Oliver Bennington's death. If it had all been because of an accidental discovery, then it would have ended with the murders. But the way in which the apartment had been turned upside down meant there was more. Oliver and the unknown victim on the kitchen counter had known something important. So what had they found out?

As with the other scenes, the killer had somehow been missed by the supposedly all-seeing Crime Detection System. The video feed had mysteriously cut out at the time. This angered Conrad greatly. He knew the killer was somehow interfering with the system and going totally unnoticed by the authorities. The criminals were always more advanced and tech savvy than his beloved police force. While the criminals worked in secret and without scrutiny, he and his fellow officers could scarcely even blow their noses without someone doing a risk assessment.

All in all, he was finding the clues were slowly forming a picture in his mind. Only a few more things needed to be cleared up before he would be satisfied that they had everything they needed from the scene. One in particular was now being seen to by Ericsson and Roberts. Witnesses were to replace the missing security feed. The killers had stepped out into public this time. That would cost them dearly.

"I'm ready here," Joe said. "Shall we?"

"Great. Go ahead." Conrad waved his arms toward the door in a repeated shooing motion. "Everybody out. Come on, clear the room."

Ericsson and Roberts were the last to be ushered through the door, both while trying to voice their desire to remain. That was not going to happen at such a crucial stage, Conrad needed space. After shutting the smashed door – as well as he could at least – he walked over to the scanner and took his place beside his partner.

“Right, here we go,” Joe said, as he reached up to the underside of the scanner’s orb and switched it on.

A few clicks and beeps later and the scan had begun. Blue lines spread out from the orb and raced up and down the walls of the room, picking out every surface and every object within. Gradually a blue grid formed all around as the area was mapped by the computer. With a basic understanding of everything there, the scan then moved on to a more detailed search. Anything the system deemed important to their case shone with holographic light to bring it to their attention. Most noticeable of all was the body.

When the scan completed, it let out three further beeps before entering a power saving mode. Now it was up to them to check its findings.

“What we got?” Conrad asked, expecting a rundown of everything already on his own list.

Joe removed his wrist computer, pulled it out into its tablet form and opened the evidence file. He surveyed the room through the clear plastic screen, checking each area for what had been found. First, he went over the body. When he stayed silent it was obvious there was nothing new there. Second, it brought his attention to the far wall where Conrad had already spotted the small holes. So far it had backed-up his own list.

“Wait, here’s something,” Joe said unexpectedly. He only made it through a small part of the list before finding what had been missed.

*Maybe I’m not as thorough as I thought,* Conrad considered.

By the rear window, the Crime Scene Scanner had found black marks on the floor.

"Do you think they got in through here?"

"Unlikely," Conrad replied as he approached the area. He dipped down and touched the darkened patch of carpet with his finger tip. Something stuck, which he immediately sniffed. "Smells like oil. I'd say they went through here for some reason, but they would have entered through the front."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, because the window isn't damaged. If they broke in through here there would be some evidence of that. This only tells us it was used at some point recently, hence the damp patch. I'd say most likely, this was how they got what they wanted *out*. It would have been the quickest way."

Conrad pulled the hanging curtain out of the way and unlocked the window. If his hunch was right, then he expected to see something outside.

"What are you looking for?"

With his head stuck out the window, Conrad replied. "There. Take a look out here." He pulled his head back in just in time to keep his glasses from slipping off his nose.

"Ok," Joe said.

"So? What do you see?"

"I see... oh, I can see more of the scraps of paper down there. So they packed up everything and tossed it out the window?"

"There were probably two of them; one throwing down a bag while the other caught it. Lucky for us neither of them were very careful. We should send someone down to retrieve the pieces. What's next on the list?"

"Let me see." Joe returned to the inside of the apartment and held his tablet computer in front of his eyes. Again the device showed him what to look at. "Right, well, we've got another few scuffs and scratches, but they appear to be from the victim's struggle. Hang on ... what do we have

here?" He stopped by the kitchen counter and aimed his screen at the floor. There was something hidden beneath.

"What is it?"

"The scan doesn't say. But something appears to have blocked it. Here, take this." Joe handed his tablet to Conrad and then dropped to his knee. He slid his hand underneath the cupboard and searched by touch alone. What he soon found was small and obviously tough to get his fingers around. "Got it!" he finally said.

Conrad recognised the item immediately. It was a tiny data coin, the type of which had gone out of use at least twenty years earlier. Storing data in one physical place had become an obsolete notion since then and it remained a method only the guilty still used.

"I'd bet my right arm that shouldn't still be here," Conrad said. "The information on that thing has become priority number one."

"How do we access it though?" Joe clambered to his feet and wiped away the dust stuck to his trousers. The apartment had definitely not been cleaned in a long while.

"Hopefully tech support should be able to do something with it. I'll give them a call."

The pair waited while a link was established with the tech department back at the station. After a long pause and a flicker of interference, a gentle face appeared on Conrad's wrist computer. The redheaded Barbara was head of the tech department. She had a friendly smile ready to greet him with.

"Conrad, dear, what can I do for you?"

Joe mouthed the word *dear* back at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello, Barbara." Conrad waved his partner away with a degree of embarrassment. "Could you take a look at an old data coin for me?"

She and Conrad were roughly the same age and yet she barely had any crow's feet around either eye. "Sure, honey,

just place it on your screen and I'll see what I can do."

The coin stuck magnetically to his wrist computer the moment he held it close. A glowing and pulsating circle then formed around it as the device tried to read the contained data. It remained like this for a second or two until the process had ended. A flashing red shape signified it had failed to read the data coin.

*Typical*, Conrad thought. It was never that simple.

"No good, I'm afraid," Barbara said. "The coin isn't responding. I'm sorry, Con."

Another raised eyebrow from Joe.

Removing the coin brought Barbara's face back to the fore, still smiling and ready to help.

"Never mind. If I have someone drop it off to you, do you think you could try again?"

"Absolutely. The equipment here should have a better chance of finding something. Is it urgent, I mean do you need it today?"

"If you wouldn't mind." Conrad returned an awkward smile.

"Anything for you, dear."

When the call ended, Conrad let out a long breath he had been holding in for most of the conversation. She had a pleasant personality and a genuinely likeable nature, but she still made him nervous. Such attention brought him feelings of guilt anyway; his wife had died more than five years ago and still he could never imagine being with anyone else. Even his two daughters had often told him to try.

"Would you like me to leave the room next time she calls, maybe give you some privacy?"

"Very funny, Joe. Can we get back to this now, please?" Conrad said with a smirk. "Anything else we missed?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope, we got the rest."

"Good. I want to take a quick look downstairs, see what else was dropped. Come find me when you've finished

packing the scanner away."

"Fine."

Pulling the door open and stepping through landed Conrad right in the middle of a crowd, the corridor full of people trying to catch a glimpse of the crime scene. Some had a strange fascination with death that he could never understand.

"Move back, please," Conrad ordered. It quickly dawned on him that the uniformed officers there had been trying to achieve the same long before he showed up. He had things to do, though, and decided to leave them to it.

At the end of the corridor he entered a lift and pressed for the ground floor. Deep in thought, he failed to spot someone enter and stand beside him. It was only when the person spoke that he even realised he had company.

"Did the guy in that apartment murder his friend and then kill himself?" the person said.

"What?" Conrad replied as soon as his mind had cleared. "Did you know him?"

"No, no. I've just heard a few things around here. Some are saying his friend was killed and dumped in a warehouse or something."

It took Conrad no more than a couple of sentences to see through the ploy. He faced the man, focusing intently on his blue eyes. He knew a reporter when he saw one. This one had at least dressed casually to try and fit in with the neighbours. The scraggly jumper he wore and scuffed jeans were trying far too hard, though.

"You live in this building? Which apartment number? I can check myself when we reach the ground level if you'd like?"

The man dropped his shoulders and leaned back against the lift's railing. "Fine. You got me. Come on, man, surely you've got something you could give me? I'll keep your name out of it."

“No deal. I’ve got enough on my plate without the likes of you sniffing around. When the time’s right you’ll get everything. Until then I can’t say a word, got it?”

“It will have to come out sooner or later, the Mayor can’t hide this for much longer. You worried he might cut your paycheque if you speak out or something?”

The reporter had hit the nail on the head with that one. Conrad had been given enough of a talking to about letting anything slip about the murders. It had never been said explicitly that going against the Mayor’s wishes would incur such a punishment, only implied. Still, hearing someone who knew nothing spout it out at him like this brought his blood to a boil.

He slammed the man hard against the wall and stared into his face. “Just fuck off, you got it?” The lift rattled as the weight inside shifted suddenly to one side.

“Hey, easy, easy. I get it, I get it.”

A *ping* noise announced their arrival while both were locked in place. Anyone waiting outside would have gotten a worrying sight as the doors opened. Thankfully the lobby was empty.

“Go,” Conrad insisted, releasing the man a second later. He disappeared through the entrance doors soon after.

*Take it easy, Conrad*, he told himself during a moment of quiet. Composure restored, he ventured out into the open air. He was glad to see the reporter had left the area. Now he could return to his job and see to tracking down more evidence.

Around the rear of the building he followed the path until reaching the right place. A glance up to the third floor showed the open window of the victim’s apartment. Lying in a scattered pattern about the ground were the torn pieces of paper spotted from above. He bent down and scooped up a handful to look over. They had been left to soak up the small, black puddle of grease they sat within. When the wind threatened to blow a few more away he stepped on



them. The wind had probably taken some of it away already anyway, it would not have mattered to lose some more. Most of it was irrelevant, just bills and letters.

But there was something else too.

"Joe," he said into his wrist computer. A moment later his partner appeared, curving away slightly at the forehead.

"What's up?"

"I've got the trash down here," Conrad said. "Most of it is covered in muck, the same as the carpet stain upstairs, I suspect. But I think I've found something. This is part of a shipping manifest, dated from a week ago - well a copy of one anyway. A company called GEL. No mention of what it's for. Still, it could be important."

"GEL?"

"Yeah, stands for Global and Efficient Logistics according to this paperwork. Are you finished up there? I think we should take a look, might be a while before we get anything from the data coin."

Joe grimaced at the mention of visiting another location. "That will have to wait. I just heard from the DCS that she wants to speak to you, urgently."

"About what?"

"No idea. She sounded pissed though. I think we should head back there first. I'll ask Ericsson and Roberts to take a look at the place for us."

Conrad sighed loudly. "Fine, but make sure they follow the scene inspection instructions on their wrist computers to the letter. I'm not letting them screw things up because they didn't stick to the correct procedures again. Meet me downstairs?"

"Sure," Joe replied. "Oh, one more thing. The witness reports seem to match what you said. Three people in the building saw two men throwing black bags out the window a couple of days ago. While one witness said they saw two guys in black fatigues on the staircase last night. Reported

to have been around late twenties and wearing some kind of electronic headbands.”

“Headbands?” Conrad said, perplexed by the mention of something so seemingly unthreatening. “What kind?”

“They didn’t say. Why?”

A thought had struck Conrad. “Well, were they small and with something stuck somewhere in front of the left ear?”

“What are you getting at, Conrad?”

“Nothing. I’m just thinking out loud, that’s all. Seems an odd thing to have specified in the report.”

“Yeah, well, that’s people for you.”

“Roger that.” Conrad ended the call and pocketed the loose paper before leaving the area.

For some reason that he could not even guess at his presence was required back at base. He tried to think over the last few days to find anything he might have done to have angered the DCS. There was nothing he could see. He would find out soon enough and for the time being would just have to keep thinking. Knowing what he may have done wrong before arriving at the station would take some of the heat off of him. If not, he risked making it worse.

After meeting up with Joe and helping him carry the equipment as he continued to pack it away, they went straight for the Mag-Lev line. With the power restored it was again running, albeit as well as it currently did. A small queue ahead of them made a mild inconvenience, but after a wait of around twenty minutes they eventually had a free Mag-Lev car and were travelling at speed.

Conrad hated the state of the transport system in the city. Since the disastrous loss of the relay network and the subsequent collapse of the Simova Corporation, everything had fallen apart. The government had stepped in to try and take control of the country’s data and power network, but they found themselves quickly swamped by the sheer size of the task the repairs represented. Since then a mass auction

had handed the job to any private investors willing to step-up. New Chelmsford's *saviour* was their current Mayor.

Things were getting better under him, just very slowly. Conrad had to laugh to himself when he conceded; his city was one of the lucky ones. They were all rather privileged to find themselves being looked after, while other cities were struggling. However bad the Mag-Lev line operated and despite the amount of times there were breaks in service, he was at least able to expect it back sooner rather than later. The Mayor was the one to thank for that.

\* \* \*

Back at the station and about to step into the unknown, Conrad and Joe cautiously entered their office. Only two of the desks inside were occupied, by fellow CID officers tending to their reports. Despite this the noise in the room was high. And worryingly, almost all of it came from DCS Chalmers' office. She had not once lowered her voice since they walked in.

"That doesn't sound promising," Joe said.

"You said she only wanted to see me?"

"Yep. Sorry."

Conrad flicked up his eyebrows. "Here goes then."

"I'll drop the data coin off to tech support while you're in there. I'll wait there for you."

"Sure," Conrad replied, his eyes hovering in the direction of the closed office. The DCS rarely shut her door like this.

He stood beside the entrance and waited to be seen. Knocking was not a wise option in his mind; the last thing he wanted to do was make things worse before they had even started. Eventually the shouting subsided and a muffled conversation took its place. One of those arguing had conceded.

A shadowy figure approached a moment later and the door then opened. DCS Chalmers greeted him with a frown that sucked the blood from his face. The obvious disagreement had aged her own face by a couple of years, it seemed. Needless to say, she looked angry, although not with him.

"Come in please, Conrad," she said. "Take a seat."

The room was dark, and now Conrad could see why. On the far wall loomed a pale face, waiting patiently for him to enter and sit. He partially recognised the person on the screen. Something about the man's waxy looking skin and dark eyes had jolted his memory a little. They had met before somewhere. A name was trailing not too far behind, it was on the tip of his tongue. Unfortunately, when his memory eventually served it up to him the conversation had already started.

"Hello, Conrad," the man said. "My name is Stanley Cartwright."

"Good evening, sir." Conrad was far from positive that the *Sir* was warranted, he used it anyway, just in case the man had authority over him.

"I expect you need some context here. I am the Deputy Mayor."

*That's it, that's where I know you from,* Conrad thought as he took the seat left empty just for him.

The camera backed away to reveal a long wooden table behind Stanley. Sitting at it, and in full conversation with his much younger secretary, was the silvery haired Mayor. The situation was not even getting his full attention, instead he had delegated it to the Deputy Mayor.

"My job here is to pass on our decision as to how your investigation is to proceed."

*Proceed?* It was happening again, Conrad realised. The Mayor had once again taken it upon himself to interfere in police matters. The question that remained was: how far was it to go this time?

"I don't quite follow, sir," Conrad said. "The investigation is already ongoing, there's no need to change anything."

"That is not entirely true, Mr. Robinson. The Mayor and I feel the time has come to intervene, for the good of the city, you understand. We've decided to see a new police taskforce set up to deal with this possible serial-killer-cult. You are requested to hand over all and any evidence pertaining to the case and to cease your own investigation immediately."

"What? You can't do that."

DCS Chalmers sat on the corner of her desk and looked apologetically at Conrad. "I'm sorry, I tried to stop them."

"Surely I should be part of the taskforce then. You can't just shut me out like this."

"Mr. Robinson, I understand this is hard for you to accept, but this thing needs to be dealt with appropriately. It cannot be allowed to get any bigger than it already has. Now, the taskforce will bring all of the evidence together and proceed from there. You are off the case."

The room fell silent as Conrad tried to find another angle to use in his effort to remain involved. Did he really have any other choice but to give up? He had nothing to hand that worked, short of begging. In the end he decided to try that.

"Please, I need this," he said, his hands linked and shaking toward the large face in front of him.

"Conrad, there's something you should know." DCS Chalmers walked around the table and took her seat. "Another station has found one of these dump sites. They have six bodies, all with the same injuries as ours. The case is too big for us to deal with alone." She turned and faced the screen. "You'll get what we have by the morning. Is that all, or is there more?"

Angling himself away from the display, Stanley conferred wordlessly with his superior. Mayor Crawley looked up from his paperwork and nodded his approval. The matter had not

even warranted an apology, they simply took the case without any concession at all.

Stanley reached for the off switch to his side, before glaring down at them both. "That is all." He then disconnected abruptly, sending the room back into darkness.

The lighting slowly increased automatically upon ending the video call.

"This is bullshit!" Conrad said, slapping his fist against the table beside him. DCS Chalmers flinched with surprise at the outburst.

"Please, Conrad, take it easy," she said. "There's nothing we can do about it. Once we hand over what we have, the case is out of our hands. Gather everything together. I need it ASAP."

"So, what am I expected to do after that, ignore it ever happened?"

"Not quite." DCS Chalmers spun her clear plastic computer around and hit the screen to bring it out of hibernation. "Mr. Cartwright gave me this."

On the display was a photo of a blonde woman with a spikey haircut.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"No real name, just a nickname. She's known as Phoenix. The Crime Detection System picked her up entering the city this morning, before she then disappeared. She's wanted in connection with the terrorist attack eighteen months ago. The Mayor wants you to find her."

A long sigh said everything Conrad thought about that.

"Look, I can see this is a wild-goose-chase, but we can't refuse, we're already in the Mayor's bad books. I for one can't risk pissing him off any further; I made it quite clear to Mr. Cartwright what I think about all of this before you came in," the DCS said. "Get on with tracking this woman down and I'll keep pushing to have them add you to their taskforce, how about that?"

“Fine, thank you, Ma’am.” Conrad stood and walked out. He had to get out of there and tell Joe straight away. His partner was much better at venting anger and would be the only one able to stop him bottling it all up inside.

Just as he turned the corner out into the hall, DCS Chalmers called after him.

“Get yourself home after you’ve told Joe, you need a rest,” she said.

A couple of corridors later and he arrived at the tech support department with a new redness to his face, and a whole heap of heat in his veins. The anger had built as he walked, only causing him to need a release sooner.

The very moment Joe spotted him entering the brightly lit room, he got to work calming his superior down. “Breathe, long breaths. In, out, in out.”

“We’re off the case,” Conrad said. His glasses steamed up quickly with each hot breath let out.

“You’re kidding.”

“No. They took it and they want everything we have too. Start getting it together, we have until morning.”

“Even the data coin?” Joe asked, with a flick of his head to the busy computer behind him.

“Even that.”

After a long release of breath of his own, Joe then called to Barbara. She popped her head out from behind a row of server cases at the end of the room and gave them a nervous smile.

“Yes?” she said, her usual pleasantries on hold for the time being. She was clearly trying to hide from an uncomfortable situation.

“How long will it take to access the data coin?” Joe asked.

“Well,” she began, stepping sheepishly out from her hiding place. “The system is struggling to open it at the moment. I’d say another hour at least.”

"It won't be done until morning, *right?*" Joe said, with a wink. "No point in rushing."

Conrad felt a wry smile spread across his face. "Morning, that's what they said."

"Fine." Barbara walked over to her computer and began to type on the screen. "You'll have what's on it *by the morning*," she said, using her fingers as quotation marks.

That was at least something Conrad could be happy about. The Deputy Mayor's new taskforce would get everything when they wanted it, only not before he had a look at it all. The data coin would reveal its secrets to him and Joe first.

"I could kiss you, Barbara," Conrad said.

Barbara blushed and turned away. Joe just rolled his eyes instead.



## Chapter 10

### Hidden evils?

*8pm, Thursday: 28 hours until Switchover*

**P**hoenix sat with a now cold cup of coffee in her hands, her fingers wrapped around and interlocked. She was in a deeply contemplative mood. The coffee shop was empty, with only the remaining staff to keep her company. This was one of the many small businesses Rhys owned and ran from his hidden back rooms. As far as covers go, this was one of the more ingenious of setups. Rhys was seen as a good, hardworking member of society as a result. He was the exact opposite in reality.

The hours since she had spoken to the man trapped in his own body - called Jack - had been tough. Her mind had not rested for a moment. All the possible scenarios were running on a constant loop for her distracted brain to look over. Not one of them had a happy ending either. Somewhere out in the city was a place she needed desperately to find and if possible, shut down.

Sentients in human form; that was one of the signs of the apocalypse in her opinion.

So far the presence inside Jack's body had not returned to unfairly claim the body. The small, black box on his head was still flickering, they had not destroyed it accidentally. Rhys had made a guess that the thing was probably in some kind of boot-up process of sorts, and that it could take hours

before it was finished. Of course even Rhys' expert opinion did not amount to much in this case. No-one had seen anything like it before. Not even her.

She fought to break free of the guilt she had felt after putting Jack back under, only to reach a ceasefire with it a good hour or so later. By that time both she and Rhys had been left mentally exhausted by the lengthy conversations that had followed. It did not help that Rhys knew so little of what happened eighteen months earlier. She had decided to tell him before anything could be said of their current situation.

Her words had shocked and scared her friend like never before. She told him everything, from her first realisation that Anthony was crazy, to her final escape from the crumbling remains of Sanctuary. Understandably, Rhys had no idea about any of it. He and everyone else in the city had been told a lie. The news had reported it all as a terrorist attack by an unknown, anti-technology group. She had even been shown on the evening news as one of them.

Out of everything explained to him, however, it was the misrepresented account of Isaac's initial demise that had been the hardest thing for him to accept. Finding out that the world's first AI had in fact escaped, reformed and now appeared to be in the city somewhere, had not gone down well. She originally intended to keep it all from him. Except things had changed well beyond what she could predict. Help, from wherever it may come, was very much needed. Even though Rhys' methods appeared odd to her, they certainly worked. He had become her only real chance of digging any deeper.

When the conversation eventually ended, she had decided to take a walk outside. She had not gone far, mainly because of the chance of being spotted by any passers-by. After that she sent an update to Elliot from one of Rhys' network connected computer terminals out in the public area. Rather than tell him everything, and get him and the

others all riled up, she left it to just a confirmation that she had not been caught or hurt.

That had all gone by in a heartbeat to her. She had no idea how long she had wasted sitting and staring at the walls of Rhys' café. The people who had left since her arrival had seemed to disappear before her eyes as her concentration wavered. Each time she snapped back to reality when another had left without her noticing. And now it was already time to shut-up-shop for the evening.

*Time flies when you're facing a crisis*, she thought before downing the remains of her drink.

She checked the wall clock behind her and was surprised to see it was already 8pm. It was time to check on Ninety-three again. To get back to Rhys' hidden back rooms she went through the rear of the café, with a thank you to the remaining staff along the way – none of which really knew about Rhys' main source of income. A few narrow and dark corridors later, and she had once again arrived at the large, metal door. She knocked and, as always appeared to be the case, she was met by Matt's bulging eye almost poking through the spy hatch.

"What?" he said.

"Just let me in, Matt, I'm not in the mood."

"Don't think that's a good idea anymore. Why don't you leave and try again tomorrow?"

It was not the first time Matt had tried his best to tell her, in no uncertain terms, that she was no longer welcome there. If Rhys had left, even for a few minutes, she was sure her time there would have been over and Matt would have thrown her out, along with her unconscious companion. He was an irritation to her, but at least he was being so for a good reason; he was Rhys' right-hand-man and had the business' wellbeing to preserve. By bringing her problems there, she was making that much harder for him to do.

"Don't make me poke that bug-eye of yours out of its socket! Open up. I'll be gone the second I can, and no

earlier," she replied with a slap of the door.

"No, I won't let you screw things up for us. Take your friend and just leave. I'm warning you now—" He stopped the moment Rhys came into the room behind him. As if to try and hide their disagreement, he smiled and pushed his long fringe back over his head.

"Matt, what are you doing? Let her in for fuck's sake," Rhys said dismissively.

The locks began to flick open and the door then finally swung in. Matt chose not to reply in words and simply grunted in the way he liked to do on occasion. He was more like a guard-dog than a doorman. Luckily Rhys had him on a tight leash and rarely let him step out of line too often, even though they clearly disagreed about her being there.

She entered and walked straight past Matt without saying anything, not even a thank you. Through the curtain door she carried on until reaching the small room Ninety-three had been left in. When she left, over an hour and a half earlier, he had been secured to the chair with black cable ties. Now he was not there.

Spinning around to Rhys, who stood behind her with a guilty expression on his face, she said, "Where is he? Tell me!"

"Don't worry, Phoenix, he's fine."

"Why would you untie him? I told you he's dangerous, Rhys."

She hurried along the rest of the corridor. It led to the large, messy storage room Rhys had found his old tech in hours earlier. Piled up from floor to ceiling were pieces of technology, some of which looked older than her. Glass screens, touch screens, keyboards, cables and an assortment of slightly newer tech lay about the place, like it had all died and found tech-heaven.

But to her surprise, in the middle of the entire pile, and with a huge smile on his stolen face, was Ninety-three. He stopped his searching of the storage room to greet her like

a friend. It had no idea she and Rhys had spoken to the real owner of the body, she was sure of it. If he had known, she expected him to have acted with suspicion toward her.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked. Curiosity was all that stopped her from grabbing and hauling him back into the small room to be tied up and guarded at gun point again.

"Hello, Phoenix," he replied. He did not seem to consider she was being anything but friendly, and was eager to share his thoughts with her freely – without a care in the world. "I believe I can remember something from before. The device on my head has been reset and is working better than before. I think I should be able to retrieve more once I have found what I need. Rhys?"

"Yo!" Rhys stepped out from behind Phoenix's angry and confused presence.

"Do you possess another two of these?" Ninety-three asked, raising what looked to Phoenix to be the insides of an older model of the now ubiquitous wrist computers.

"Sure, somewhere in there. Do you need that exact model?"

"I believe so." Ninety-three then began to search the next pile along from him. "This model contains a more rigid form of the nano-circuitry used in later ones. I will need three of these devices in total, in order to create a multi-layered processing pane. Also, the Graphene contained within the older model's capacitor layer is much less efficient at higher temperatures. Due to the way it was manufactured, I suspect. This should help throttle back the electron flow enough to make it compatible. It should then work with this more archaic selection of technology."

"What the hell did he just say?" Phoenix interrupted, before Rhys could answer.

Ninety-three launched a tangle of cables to the side of the room without aiming. The corner was evidently where the tech he did not want would live from now on.

“He’s trying to make something that can talk to the black box thing on his head,” Rhys explained to her. “When he woke up he said he knew how to fix it. I might not understand how he’s planning on doing that yet, but I’m pretty sure he’s on the right track. Whatever is allowing that box to work is far more complex than anything I understand.” He began to speak louder so that Ninety-three could hear him above the crashing and bashing noises the tech sorting was causing. “I’m guessing you’re trying to build something to communicate with it, rather than fix it completely. Is that right?”

While digging a small hole in the tech lying in front of him, Ninety-three turned back. “Indeed, Rhys, well done,” he said, launching more unwanted pieces to the far side of the room. His condescending comment did not match his tone at all, he had not meant it the way it had sounded, by the look of his non-reacting face.

“Awesome,” Rhys said as he ventured deep into the chaos of his storage room. “So what else do you need? We’ll find it all much quicker if we help too.”

“A very good point, Rhys. There are some things I will require that I do not expect you will have.”

“Sure, hit me.”

Ninety-three stopped suddenly, his face scrunched up in response. “I do not wish to strike you, Rhys. We are friends, are we not?” he said.

“No, I meant ... never mind. What do you need?”

Ninety-three left his search area and began to list what he needed out loud. It was a long one too, with items ranging from a basic soldering iron to Carbon Steel Sewing needles. Even a bottle of Acetone was included; he was planning on dissolving the plastic casing of the wrist computers to release the nano-circuitry locked inside. It all sounded like he knew exactly what he was doing and that was all Phoenix cared about.

She was finding the way the two men were cooperating so well together a slightly disturbing thing to watch, however. She was not about to say anything for the time being, they were making some progress after all. Still, the thought that poor Jack was somewhere inside did not sit right with her. He was being kept prisoner while the Sentient in control was allowed to move freely. If they were on to something and a handful of answers were coming, then she had no choice but to carry on for a little while longer, even though what she really wanted was to find a way to get the thing out of his body altogether.

"OK, I think I should be able to get all that stuff." Rhys had written down the required ingredients into his wrist computer. "I'll be back in a little while."

"Wait," Phoenix said as he left the room. She chased him back through the corridor until they were surrounded by his computer collection, the machines still hard at work. The silent men working them had evidently gone home for the day, leaving whatever processes they had going to run through the night. "Hey, you're not going to leave me with him are you?"

Rhys swung his coat around his back and swooped his arms inside. She stood deliberately in front of him, blocking his escape. "You heard him, he needs this stuff," he said. "I won't be long, I need to be back before the 10pm curfew starts anyway. Plus Matt and Dean are still around."

Dean, it turned out, was the large armed guard she had pissed off earlier.

"After everything I told you about his kind, and you're fine with him wandering around freely? What if he's in contact with Isaac now?"

"Phoenix, listen to yourself, you're being paranoid. What about him makes you think he's here to hurt us? You said he came to you with information. That doesn't sound like someone working with a psychopathic AI hell-bent on world domination."

His logic was undeniable, yet she could not care less about being reasonable while her enemy remained nearby. Ninety-three was a Sentient and that was all that mattered. Whether he was helping them or not, she had no intention of keeping him around for longer than necessary. It was dangerous for them and worse, unfair for poor Jack. Her thoughts were not venturing far from this one fact; the human owner was still inside.

Once at the large door, Rhys looked back and said, "If you're that worried, your gun's still in the small room. Just promise me you won't use it. I for one believe he's been telling you the truth all along. He's here to help."

She did not answer and let him leave in silence. With the room now empty, the sounds from the back room were louder than ever. Each crash was like a nail in the side of her head. The Sentient's every action was an affront to everything she knew to be right. Rhys had only her word to go on when judging how bad a Sentient could really be. She had seen it first-hand. Isaac was beyond anything she ever knew before. Not even Anthony had ever come close. Her tiny glimpse of the enemy had been more than enough.

On the way back to the storage area she detoured into the small room where her weapon was, quietly picked it up and then hung it over her shoulder. She had no desire to give Ninety-three the chance to turn on her. Despite Rhys' insistence that he was there to help, she was not about to trust him blindly.

Her first peek into the tech junkyard had meant to be a silent and unseen one. With her shoulder pushed against the door frame, she leaned in and saw him straight away. Either he had been expecting it or his hearing was much better than she thought, because the second she spotted him, he spotted her too.

"Hello, Phoenix. I am around seventy percent sure I can retrieve something more from my memories," he said with a casual look around him.



"Great. Any chance you could stop searching for a second?"

"Certainly." He dropped the object in his hands immediately and then stepped out of his search pile.

"Do you even know what you are?"

With his head pushed back and his eyebrows furrowed, he looked at her, bemusement written all across his tired face. "Why do you say it like *that*? Should it not be *who*, rather than *what*?"

"No, it shouldn't. That body isn't yours, it's Jack's. Do you know who Jack is?"

Again his face retorted in reaction to her strange accusation. "Jack? I have no—" For a second he looked blankly ahead as if his mind had faltered unexpectedly. When he returned, it was with a sharp change to his mood and tone. "Jack... Jack..."

"Hudson," she said to jog him free from his stutter. "The body you've stolen is Jack Hudson's. We've spoken to him, we know you're a Sentient."

"No..."

"Yes. You're a computer program... no a virus, and nothing more. You're definitely not human."

"No... I don't... I..." He had nothing.

"You belong in this pile. You're just a piece of broken equipment."

She suddenly found herself wielding her words as though they were weapons of retribution. The further she pushed, the more she could feel a cruel satisfaction erupt through her. It felt good to hurt him, even if it was never going to help.

"You don't know..."

"You're nothing but a faulty system. Do you know what humans do to faulty systems?"

Ninety-three shuffled backward in a failed attempt to create some distance between himself and his fiery tempered inquisitor. Into his pile he stepped, one piece

kicked aside at a time. His eyes never left the floor while she laid into him some more.

"We shut them down. We delete them. That's what I'm going to do to you," she said, her hands squeezed into fists by her side. "I'm going to delete you one line of code at a time. The same goes for all the other Sentients out there. And as for Isaac, he's next on my list. You fuckers aren't going to win this."

She took a step to him, exactly as her rage dictated, and raised an accusing finger to his eye level. It hovered an inch or two from his nose, drawing his eyes back up to meet hers. Another attack should have followed, but it was then that she saw the real result of her angry release of vitriol. The Sentient was not enraged or offended. He was upset. His eyes were shimmering with an unstoppable glaze of moisture. The most dangerous thing in the world was trying desperately to hold back tears.

Her right hand slammed tightly against her open mouth. A sharp breath flowed through her fingers as she stood watching in shock, and slight shame. She was becoming a bully. The attack had made her feel better for a second or two, now it crushed her insides. Rhys was right, this was not how her enemy would be acting. In his eyes, she saw a vulnerability she had never expected.

He did not understand her hatred at all.

"I'm sorry," she could not help but say. The confusion was playing havoc with her emotions. In one instance she was almost shouting with a quickly building and nearly unstoppable anger, the next she felt a painful sensation of guilt. Without really knowing why. Perhaps Rhys had been right and she was being paranoid?

"Why are you saying such vile things," Ninety-three said.

Trying her best to answer this proved a pointless waste of energy. In truth she had no answer, or any idea where to start. Over the course of the eighteen months since Sanctuary had been lost, her anger had been placed in

reserve. There had been no time to release such pure hatred into the world. It had scared her too. The well of rage she had tapped felt almost bottomless, like an abyss of pent-up feelings. Thankfully, she managed to stop short of falling to her doom.

"You don't have a clue what I'm talking about, do you?" she said.

"I do not."

"Here, let me wipe your eyes..."

She reached out to him slowly, only to be stopped a moment later by his reaction. The way he leaned back into his protective pile of junk made it clear she had broken whatever trust he once had in her. The words had cut him deeply.

"This Isaac you speak of, is he a Sentient too?"

She nodded.

"And Jack Hudson?"

"No, he's the human whose body you're inside."

"I... I." Again he began to stutter. "I am not human." He said it not as a question this time, but as a statement. "I am a Sentient. Jack is a human. This is his body."

"Yes," she said, surprised to see him taking it on board suddenly. He was starting to remember more.

He went on. "I do not belong in this body, in this world, in this place. I belong..."

"You belong where?" She realised what he was trying to say by the triangle shape he made with his hands. He began to act it out in place of the missing word. "The tower! Is that what you're saying, you belong in the tower."

"Yes, I came from the Sentient Tower."

"OK, that's good. But the tower is dead, it doesn't glow anymore. So where did you come from?"

"No," he said. "I escaped the tower. I jumped from the building. The glass broke as I threw myself through it. I then landed on another building next door."

He was not talking about the Sentient Tower at all. He was remembering something else, something mentioned before. A place where he had faced an unknown operation, with blinding lights and glistening knives. Exactly the location Phoenix needed to find.

"Can you remember where that happened?"

"I cannot," he replied, shaking his head slightly.

"Please, just try for me. It's really important."

"I'm sorry, Phoenix, I am unable to think of any more than that. I should be able to give you the answers you seek once Rhys has returned with the extra supplies."

It was no good, she decided, she was getting nowhere through forced means. If building some unknown contraption could bring more memories forward, then that was what they had to do. Neither of them had the strength for another confrontation anyway.

She took it upon herself to begin pulling pieces of old tech away from a nearby pile and examining it. Whether it could help or not was irrelevant, she only wanted to show him *she* was willing. "Do you need one of these?" she asked.

Ninety-three smiled as he blinked the last layer of dampness away. She did not think he had even noticed the fluid invading his view of the world a moment ago. Possibly one of the many things he was still to understand. It appeared they knew almost nothing of each other's world.

He took the small piece of plastic from her and threw it against the far wall. "Not in the slightest," he replied, with a tiny waver to his voice. Something akin to a giggle had tried to get out.

For the next hour and a half the two of them silently searched the room. With four hands working rather than just the two, they soon began to make a clear patch, free from unwanted debris. The dumping corner was now so high the mess was blocking out most of the window to the side.

When Rhys finally arrived he stopped and stared into his once sacred collection of old and unused tech. His eyes scanned the floor for any sign of his own sorting. There was none left, they had completely stripped the place bare. Only that which was useful to their current plan was even remotely treated with respect.

"What the hell?" he said, placing his handful of bags on the table in the empty corner. "I leave you for an hour or two and you turn the place upside down."

Phoenix and Ninety-three looked at each other with guilty grins across their faces. During their carefully maintained silence, they had shared a moment of ease in one another's company. Something she had appreciated greatly. Slowly she was beginning to see him as she had the first time they met, like someone who wanted to help. It did not make her acceptance any easier though. For now, she had changed her mind about removing him and killing him entirely. Of course, Jack was still the priority, but maybe the Sentient inside was not bad. She had struggled with this while allowing her mind to wander.

"Did you find the correct items, Rhys?" Ninety-three asked.

"Yep, and some extra things I thought might help too."

The two then perused their new pieces of trash, while Phoenix stepped away. She watched as Ninety-three became wide eyed and wholly focused on the task in hand. He was determined to remember more. It was obviously pissing him off as much as it was her.

"So how long will it take you to build this thing then?" Rhys asked.

"I estimate a build time of roughly four to five hours. Once I am done I will call you both back."

With that Ninety-three began to shoo them both out of the room. Evidently he needed the space to himself while he worked.

"Sure, I guess. Well, er, Phoenix, shall we?"

On their way out, Phoenix pulled the curtain door closed with one last peek at the strange man. He paid no attention to them at all. As they left him behind, he had his mind only on the newly bought contents of Rhys' bags. She let the curtain close fully and walked the corridor. Rhys was stood waiting for her in the large computer room.

"Glad to see you chose not to paint my apartment with his insides," he said, slapping her shoulder hard as he walked past.

"Yeah, we had a talk."

"And?" Rhys disappeared into one of the small rooms along the corridor, returning a moment later with two cooled cans of beer. He threw one to her.

"And he doesn't seem as dangerous as I first thought."

"What changed your mind?"

The can spat at her as she pulled the ring, followed by a settling fizz. "He..." The coolness of it enticed her into taking a quick sip. "I don't really know what it means, but..." She deliberated again.

"But?"

"Well, he almost began to cry when I told him about Jack."

"Really? Weird," Rhys said, as he took a swig from his own beer. "Not quite what you'd expect from an evil program in a human body, huh?"

There seemed little point in replying, his *I-told-you-so* of sorts had been received loud and clear. They both knew labelling the Sentient in Jack's body as evil had been without warrant. Even so, she had tried to ignore it at the time. She was starting to see, in the way he had taken her verbal attack earlier, that he was nothing of the sort. Nothing about him fit her expectations. He was not like Isaac, not one bit.

"You should try to get some sleep, you look knackered," Rhys said, after polishing off the remains of his beer and breathing out heavily. She had not even made it halfway

through her own. Instead she stood staring into space. Rhys was right, she decided as her eyes became heavy.

"Fine, but I still don't want you trusting the Sentient in there. Don't speak to him without me, OK?"

Rhys nodded with deliberation. "I won't, I promise."

Again he entered the same small room along the narrow corridor and came back with something for her. He kept a treasure trove of supplies in that one small room, it appeared. Everything from ice-cold drinks to what he now arrived with; two fluffy pillows and a thin blanket. He threw them onto the small couch against the wall of the room, opposite the darkened windows. This was her sleeping accommodation for the night. Not quite as comfy as her own bed, but it was definitely better than the floor.

"I'll wake you up when he's finished. It's 9:45pm now, so he should be done early morning sometime." Rhys then left the room, remembering to turn the light out on his way.

It made little difference, but a couple of the computers in the room with her were still lit up and flickering their light around, like the last embers of a fire. Whatever process Rhys had them performing, it at least sounded like they were done with the hard stuff. They hummed in chorus on the other side of the room to her. Though rather than become a nuisance, they called quietly to her like a small collection of crickets in the night. Either that or she was more tired than she realised and simply did not care.

As her eyelids became heavy and her aching body relaxed into the soft cushion beneath, she took a moment to consider what was to come. Her own fears and anger had been all she needed until now. They alone were not going to keep her safe any longer. That much was clear. The same level-headedness and brutal honesty that had guided her throughout her time under Anthony's dark shadow was what she needed back again. If anything, leaving the city eighteen months ago had made her slightly soft, as soft as the blanket she pulled over her face. She needed the edge

and dangerousness again. Whatever was coming, she knew it was going to test her once more.

The one thing that would keep her sane and together was the knowledge that her family was not at risk this time. She did not only mean her brother Sean either, she meant the others too. They were all her family now.

Minutes later and the world, with all of its unknown evils and missing loved ones, had ended temporarily for her. It had been a long day made worse by added stress. When she was to wake again, she knew it would be with a certain amount of trepidation.

Ninety-three's answers were going to decide his fate as well as hers.



# Chapter 11

## Pushing boundaries

**A** crashing sound burst through the silence, as yet another attempt at defying the laws of nature fell apart. Graham had lost his concentration again, sending the levitating cube he stared at to the floor. The room returned to its default level of noise once the object finished shattering upon the ground. The practice area had all but taken over Stephen's library, and it had made quite a mess already.

"No, no, no. Try again!" Stephen had lost his temper this time.

With his head aching and a degree of annoyance tensing his spine, Graham stopped and turned his large frown to face the man teaching him the seemingly impossible. He shouted his reply to Stephen, who stood a good ten metres or so away from him.

"I can't do it, for Christ's sake, I can't."

Stephen came shuffling over, his expression demonstrating exactly how frustrated he was becoming with their lack of progress. They had been trying for hours with little success. Each failure had caused a few more lines to appear on his face too.

"Graham, you have to listen to every word I say. You won't survive long outside this place without this basic skill at your disposal." Sensing he had started a little forcefully, Stephen lowered his voice and softened his tone before continuing. "Think of it like using a door in the real world;

you wouldn't be able to open it without touching the handle. In here, doorways are opened through a form of telekinesis. To hone that skill you must first learn to communicate with the world correctly."

He was exhausted. Stephen had pushed him to his limit, without a single break. His bones felt as if they had been worn to dust with the strain and stress he was putting his body through. The things Stephen was asking him to do went against everything he understood about the real world. Of course he knew that was exactly the problem. He had been told more times than he could count that what he called his humanity was now his greatest weakness. But he could not just replace that side of himself, it was what made him who he was.

If Jane had been there, the real Alex too, he would have been much stronger. A permanent reminder of what he was really fighting to regain was what he needed. Staring for hours at a floating box was not what he had in mind when agreeing hours earlier. He needed a proper incentive, one that helped him to overcome his weaknesses and not compound them. Questioning his teacher at every stage was slowing them down.

He had always hated learning anyway.

"Look, can we take a break?" he said, kicking a piece of the last box away. "I'm tired, and we're not getting very far with this. Maybe we could start again tomorrow?"

Stephen raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "You're serious, aren't you? Listen to me very carefully, Graham." He stood with his arms crossed, a sign of the seriousness of his words. "For you to progress you have to forget about everything that you once believed. In this place you are not susceptible to the same issues you were in the real world. Such things as sleep and nourishment, they do not exist to a Sentient. They are created, they live, they thrive and they self-improve. That is all. Now, if you please?"

“Fine,” Graham said. “It’s not like I’m doing anything difficult, like circumventing the laws of physics.”

Alex giggled behind them. She had stayed out the way while the two worked.

The grey cube appeared in front of Graham once more, reset in its earlier position and floating a few feet away. He focused on it as it slowly spun in the air. Already the sight of such a thing went against the natural order of things, yet he was expected to go even further and move it without touching. Apparently it represented how a Sentient interacted with their surroundings. Touch and grip were unknown concepts when referring to moving objects in their space.

*Right, telekinesis, just like in a movie. Here we go then,* Graham thought to himself.

With his voice lowered and his hands placed gently together, Stephen began the lesson again. “Now. First try and visualise the cube sliding to the left. Imagine your own hand extending out and pushing it along. Allow your mind to move with it. Your consciousness is not a fixed thing, it can move and touch things.”

He had yet to manage anything as impressive as Stephen wanted to see, but he could definitely feel something new this time. Not his own hand though. He was finding it taking another form altogether. Thinking of his family for a brief moment earlier had changed something within him. What he found most effective now was to imagine Alex moving it for him, like an invisible helper. Her tiny arms were reaching out to the shape and trying to move it with all her might. The poor thing was just not quite strong enough.

The other Alex, however, had lost interest all together.

“OK, now feel the way your mind’s eye is able to focus on the object in front of you,” Stephen continued. “See its strength. Let it build, let it build.”

Realising Stephen had seen something different too helped him along even further. Something was indeed

building, an energy he had not felt before.

"Good, good. Now, very slowly begin to push to the left."

The imagined Alex moved the object a little.

"Excellent. Again."

She pushed again.

"Once more," Stephen said with a clap of his hands. Each time he crashed them together the shape then moved in rhythm. So far Graham was doing better than ever. Except the next part was his most dreaded stumbling block.

"Keep it there. Good, you are doing well, Graham."

He had heard this far too often only seconds before screwing up.

"This bit is going to be tough--"

"Quiet!" Stephen snapped. He held out his hands as he watched intently. "Move your focus to the underside of the shape. Slowly, slowly, that's it."

In Graham's mind he simply asked his daughter to stand beneath the shape and wait for further instructions. He did not know why it was Alex he imagined, it just felt right; he knew he could trust her to help him. In truth he knew he was never the most intelligent of people. His way of overcoming a situation was to use whatever came to him, usually brute strength. This needed something much more powerful.

He had found it in a moment of doubt, exactly when it had been needed. The memories of his family had suddenly given him that extra push.

"Stay connected to the shape, do not lose focus," Stephen said. "This time I want you to take the weight of the object. When I let it drop, you have to catch it, OK?"

*I hope you're listening to this, Alex,* Graham thought as he willed the object to obey. *This time I really need your help.* He said nothing to Stephen, only nodding his reply instead. It quickly occurred to him that perhaps Alex was just not going to be strong enough to take such a weight by herself. It looked much larger than her. He had found a way

that worked, but he needed more help. So when Stephen shouted *now* at the top of his voice, it was not Alex alone that he imagined holding the shape, but Jane too.

"There! Yes, yes, you're doing it Graham."

He was shocked by the reaction of his teacher, who began jumping up and down like the ground had become electrified. Meanwhile he saw exactly what he needed to succeed; his family, albeit only in his own imagination. Something had finally clicked into place. The large part of himself that was still unable to let go of the world he once knew, had become useful.

"What do I do now?" Graham asked, his eyes quickly beginning to hurt. He was losing focus now.

"Lower it to the ground. Let it float down like a feather in the wind," Stephen replied.

Graham managed this with similar ease, although he did not think his teacher would be happy to know what it took to achieve it. He would not tell. It was his secret. If it ultimately doomed him, he did not care for the time being. It had worked and that was all that mattered. When the cube finally touched down he felt the weight vanish from his mind. Thinking felt much easier now.

His headache, whether real or virtual, had become something of a concern though.

"Excellent work, Graham. Now you must rest. The headaches will pass in time." Stephen had known all along just how bad it was getting, judging by the way he brought the subject up so casually. "It will be through repetition that you will become like us. Tell me, what suddenly made it fall into place like that?"

"No idea. It just felt right, like I was doing something totally natural."

The sidelong glance Stephen gave him proved the lie was not holding. Perhaps he knew exactly what was happening and was intrigued to see whether his pupil would share it? Graham suspected there was still a huge

amount his two new friends were not telling him. Mind reading was no stranger than telekinesis after all. If they were reading his thoughts, at least they would know just how exhausted he was too.

"You have done well, Graham."

"Thanks ... so?"

Stephen looked on, then sighed. "Fine. I did promise, I suppose. What would you like to know?"

"The Sentient war, what happened? Why did it start? I can't remember much about Isaac, but I know I was there when it first began."

"OK." Another long outward breath. "I will show you, Graham. Then after that, we train some more. Deal?"

"Deal," Graham said, his hand already extended out to seal the deal with a handshake. After his last attempt at one with a Sentient, he half expected his hand to float through like it had with Luke. Only this time it did not. Their hands slapped hard against each other's, confirming once again that his worst nightmare was actually his new reality.

"Perhaps I can take this opportunity to show you what you should soon be able to do, once we weed out that nasty habit you have of acting like a human, of course," Stephen said with a cheeky wink. "Alex, are you coming along?"

She looked up and then returned to her colourful picture-book. "Nah, that sounds boring. I'm reading about Elephants." Her imitation of his real daughter was uncanny at times.

"Very well. This way, Graham."

\* \* \*

*11pm, Thursday: 25 hours until Switchover*

Conrad looked over the coordinates displayed on his wrist computer one last time. He was confused by what they had

found sat at the location. A small, plastic pad had been embedded into the soil, covered only by a thin layer of dirt. Its purpose was in no way obvious to them.

But this was the right place. Among the garbled data streams they had discovered contained within the damaged data coin, details of the park he and Joe were in had appeared. It was somehow important to their last victim, and almost certainly the killer-cult too. Everything else was yet to reveal its secrets to the highly capable Barbara. So without much else to go on, and a looming deadline to stop their own investigation, they had taken a chance and gone straight to the place.

"You certain this is right?" Joe said before dropping to a knee and wiping the 50cm square free of debris.

"The coordinates match, this is it."

Torch aimed at his feet, Conrad searched the night-time scene around them. He could see nothing that alleviated his own doubts about the place. The park was deserted. Anyone outside at this time of night was breaking curfew anyway and would soon find themselves in trouble if discovered. Nearby housing blocks were a good hundred or so metres away and almost entirely dark. Most residents had found their beds by then. The pair of them would have been alone if not for the company of a few distant street lamps.

He knew he was missing something.

"What was the dead guy at the apartment called again?" he asked.

"Hang on a sec," Joe replied, checking his own screen. "It came up a little while ago as... Rama Nayak, er, twenty-one year old student at the local polytechnic, studying computer science."

"So," Conrad was thinking aloud again. "He's good with technology, understands it better than most. That would explain how he knew to use older devices, such as the data coin."

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, it isn’t compatible with our modern equipment, it’s from before Simova even existed. Our wrist computers don’t communicate with it in the same way. That would make it a much safer method of hiding information, and any proof that he and Oliver were involved with our killer-cult.”

“You’ve been spending far too much time with Barbara, you’re starting to sound like her.” Joe laughed to himself.

“We should check our database for old equipment that might match this plastic pad. Upload a photo of it, see what comes back.” Conrad said, ignoring his partner’s comment altogether.

After returning to his feet, Joe snapped a quick picture with his wrist computer, then began swiping the screen as he searched for a similar looking device. While he did this, Conrad took the position kneeling beside the pad. He leaned in closer. Running his fingers around the edge, he found it impossible to dig them in far enough to reach the underside. It was not just a pad, he discovered. It was a box of some kind.

He bashed his fist on the top to confirm. A dull thud returned.

Whatever it was, he had a feeling it would not be easy to get into, considering the shadowy nature of the people he sought. It had been made far too well to be broken into. They needed another way.

“I’m getting nothing,” Joe said. “Nothing that matches it at all. The thing must be an import. There’s loads of illegal tech coming into the country these days, especially now that Simova don’t run the show.”

*Bugger*, Conrad thought while he picked the dirt from his fingernails. “Let’s think this through for a moment,” he said, returning to his feet. Once up he arched his shoulders back to stretch his spine. His body wanted rest, but his mind still refused to allow it. “Why would anyone have a box like this buried in the ground in such a public place? I can



only think of two possible reasons: One would obviously be to hide something important in plain sight. Two would be to have somewhere safe to make an exchange."

"You mean a dead-drop?"

"Exactly. This could be how the killer-cult communicates."

"So you still think they were members?"

"I'm simply speculating, but that would make sense. It seems a little suspicious to me that this Rama guy and his friend would have devices hidden like this. What did they have to hide? We have a witness who said they saw two men clearing out the apartment. That was probably our two victims covering up their work. That isn't normal behaviour, is it?"

"If that's true then what's inside this box could be a major lead, possibly something we could use to track them down." Joes stopped to consider this. "We need to tell DCS Chalmers."

"No," Conrad said, a little too forcefully. "She'll tell us to report it and let the taskforce take a look. I'm not doing that until I absolutely have to." He initiated a call back to the station as he spoke. "There has to be something about it on the data coin. Let me try Barbara again."

A couple of rings later and the tech department head answered. The dark shadows around Barbara's eyes made it clear how tired she was. They had kept her at the station well beyond her work hours. She still managed a friendly smile regardless.

"You're quite the taskmaster aren't you, Conrad?" she said. "What is it now?"

"Is there anything about a dead drop box in the data you've recovered? Any mention of a regular exchange of any kind?"

"Hang on, let me take a look. You may have to wait for a bit, there's a lot of it I haven't been able to read. It's been coded to fragment if tampered with. Very clever stuff really.

Each time I'm close to piecing something new together it breaks apart again... Oh." She stopped and angled her head down to her computer screen suddenly. "What's this then?"

"Oh?" Conrad waved Joe over. "What have you found, Barbara?"

"I'm not sure. I searched for anything that looked like it could be to do with a dead-drop, and a file popped up." She fell silent, as she tapped at her screen.

"What's it say?"

"Right, sorry," she said, realising she had stopped talking again. "The data inside is heavily encrypted, it'll take a minute or two to decipher. The system seems to think this file is linked to the address I gave you. Huh... Looks like an access code generator. Six digits, randomly set each time to keep it secure."

Without a word shared between the two of them, Joe set about investigating the box for an access panel. He knelt in front of it, then began sliding his hands across the surface. "Where are you, you bastard," he said.

"If it's different each time, can we generate one using that program?" Conrad asked Barbara.

"I think so. There's a few more layers of encryption first. Hang on a sec... There. The code is 442519."

*That was easy,* Conrad thought, while watching his partner's search of the box. He could feel the anticipation rising as he sensed an imminent breakthrough. What hid within had a real chance of securing his and Joe's continued involvement in the case - unless they found someone's lunch inside.

"Try pulling at the side, maybe it slides away."

"I've tried that already, Conrad," Joe replied, slightly irritated by the back-seat-driving. "Just give me the code."

"It's 442519."

The moment the last digit had left Conrad's mouth a light flashed in the centre of the box. Joe leapt away as a motor

began to whirl from inside, followed by more lights emanating out of the middle, like tiny firefly landing-lights across the surface.

“Ha,” Joe said. “The thing’s voice activated.”

Conrad could barely believe his eyes. The top of the box opened out like a plastic flower. Each petal flipped over, then settled on the ground around it, while a circular object corkscrewed out from below. In one smooth and automated motion, the contents of the box had revealed itself to them. But it was far from done yet. The three foot high, cylindrical object in the centre of the open container began to boot-up, with a beep and a click.

“What the...” Joe said, still sprawled out on the grass.

The top of the device stretched out its eight arms, one at a time. Each snapped into place at full extension. At the end of the arms were small rotors, which spun at varying speeds as the boot-up process progressed. They had accidentally activated a drone. Sitting at the front of the main body of the craft was a large lens, now focusing squarely on them.

“Shit, its watching us.” Conrad stepped to the side. The lens followed him.

“But who’s watching on the other end?” Joe said, stumbling to his feet.

As soon as all eight rotors were revving at speed, their gnat-like roars coasting away into the night, it lifted off its pedestal and hovered a few feet above. It scanned them both with a blue light that raced up and down before disappearing. The angry buzz it spat at them upon the scan’s completion made it clear they had failed whatever check it performed. Then followed a red dot, aimed directly at their chests.

“What’s going on?” Barbara said. Her view of the world slowly turned on its side as Conrad lowered his arm.

He watched the drone hesitate before choosing its target. “Don’t move, Joe.” He held his arms apart as if to keep it and his partner away from each other.

Unfortunately for Joe, the drone had ignored Conrad for now and chosen him instead. The red dot then began to glow brighter as another whirling sound built within the craft.

“What do I do?” Joe called. “Do I shoot it?”

The thought had already occurred to Conrad. With the buckle of his holster sticking at the worst possible moment, he shouted his answer above the noise. “Yes, shoot it, shoot it now!”

Joe was much quicker at removing his weapon, but he still did not manage in time. At the peak of the noise a red bolt rocketed out from the nose of the craft and struck him in the centre of his chest. The force of the blast pushed him clean off his feet and sliding a few feet across the dry ground. He had no time to call out in pain, the shot had been too fast.

“Joe,” Conrad yelled in a panic.

The drone swooped away in reaction to its own release of energy, before correcting itself a moment later. Now it wanted another victim. It slowly manoeuvred itself to find him still standing and pulling frantically at the button of his holster. By the time he finally got it loose, he was already a painted target. It fired as he fell to the side, narrowly missing him. The shot scorched the earth a few feet away.

“Conrad, talk to me, please,” Barbara shouted through the small speaker of his wrist computer.

Face down in the dirt, Conrad ungraciously rolled onto his back, lifted his arse off his Taser pistol and yanked it free. While the craft struggled to relocate its target, he took the time to line-up the perfect shot. Once he had it dead in the centre of his sights he pulled the trigger.

The added charge blew every motor, sending bits flying off in every direction. It smashed into the ground, where the remains of the blades spun it around and kicked it back into the air, its last dying breath a pathetic display of broken plastic and smoking innards.

Joe had not flinched an inch since being hit. He lay flat on his back and staring directly at the night-time clouds. As soon as Conrad saw his partner's unresponsive state, he knew they had seriously fucked up. They were not even supposed to be there and now one of them was down and possibly badly hurt.

He picked himself up quickly, dropping his glasses to the grass as he moved, and raced over. Dropping heavily beside, he turned his friend's face to the side and was shocked by the lack of life in his eyes. Was he dead?

"Conrad?"

"Barbara," he said. She had heard the whole thing. "Joe's been hit with some kind of energy beam."

Thoughts of having to tell his partner's wife and three little girls that their beloved husband and father had died filled him with instant terror. The image of them forced its way into his brain unannounced, their teary eyes scraping at his subconscious, distracting him from the task at hand. They would never forgive him if he lost Joe.

"No, how, what the hell happened?" Barbara said.

"I can't explain right now, you need to call for help. Please be quick, he's not breathing. I think his heart might have stopped, I can't find a pulse."

"It's already gone through," she said, her eyes glued to her own screen. "A call went out the moment his wrist computer detected a surge, then stopped working. Someone's on the way."

Conrad pulled his partner into his lap and cradled his limp head. "Hurry, please."

"I'm so sorry, Conrad. The system says they're possibly ten minutes out still. There's been another failure on the Mag-Lev line."

"What? For Christ's sake, he might not last that long. I have to do something."

"I can help," a distorted voice called out to him from behind.

He twisted around to see, expecting to find a Good Samaritan standing there waiting to help. What he actually saw never even occurred to him; the drone.

"Who are you?" Conrad said. Again he could hear Barbara asking what he saw in the background.

The sound was broken and fuzzy as it tried to come through the smoking remains of the drone. An occasional popping sound interrupted the digitized voice, splitting its words at awkward moments.

"First... tell us who you... are?"

"Conrad. My friend, the one you may have killed, is Joe."

"Why are you tampering...erring... tamperrrrr... ing... with our equipment?"

"We're police officers. You've killed enough people already. Believe me, you do not want to be a cop killer too."

No answer came in response. The threat was lost on them, it needed to be considered and weighed-up.

"You said you could help. If you don't he may die. Damn you, answer me!"

More silence. If not for another crackle of burning electronics, he would have thought the device had finally packed-up. It had not. They were there still, he knew.

When the response eventually came, it was short and to the point.

"Pick...ppick up the drone, aim it... aim it directly at your friend."

He did this with a hesitant glare into the lens first. He could not tell if they could still see him or whether they were going on audio alone. It did not matter. He still felt the need to give them a good look. If what they had planned failed to work, he wanted them to know the face of the man hunting them from then onwards.

"Is it done?"

"It's done," Conrad said. "Whatever it is you're going to do you'd better hurry."

Amid the many sparks and puffs of smoke Conrad could feel something trying to kick in inside the craft. The internal components were not completely fried thankfully. It vibrated in his hands, he could feel it running up and down his arm as it increased in intensity.

"What's it doing?" he said.

Before any answer could come, another short burst of energy leapt out of the front of the drone. It struck Joe in the side, causing his body to shake all over. The device itself had dealt its last blow, then disintegrated in Conrad's hands. It fell to pieces, falling out of his grip and down to the ground in a loose pile of scrap. There was not a single part of it still lit. To bring Joe back it had sacrificed itself.

Still on his back, Joe coughed back to life. His arms suddenly shot up to the sky as the muscles started to spasm. His heart was ticking normally again. Conrad dropped to the floor beside his friend and tried his best to sit his partner up. The sobbing faces of Joe's family that had once haunted his mind now faded into the night. They would be spared the torment after all.

"Joe, can you hear me? You're OK, buddy, you're OK," he said, squeezing his friend's hand hard.

"What happened?"

"I'll explain later. There's help on the way. Don't try to move."

At such a late hour the disturbance had woken a few of the residents nearby. Where no lights had been on before, now a dozen or so were; they had made far too much noise while trying to keep their night-time investigation a secret. The DCS was certainly not going to like hearing about it either. She would not give a shit about how close they had come to the enemy. Success had charged too high a price for them.

*There goes the investigation,* Conrad thought, as he looked out across the park. His one consolation was knowing that his search had turned up something

important. The killers had balanced friends too, possibly an entire network of people involved to keep their little club running. The two latest victims had been part of something big. Helping save Joe had revealed that some of them at least had a line they would not cross. The killer-cult had some form of hierarchy, it appeared. Most important of all, they now knew who to fear. They were not going to operate in the shadows any longer.

The taskforce would have a very clear line of investigation now, thanks to them. Whether they were let in or not did not really matter to him any longer. He had done all he could. Maybe it was time to let others take over?

In the distance he could hear the emergency siren from the Mag-Lev station a few streets away. Help had finally arrived.

"Joe, I think you're going to be fine," he said, as a sense of relief spread throughout his body. He closed his eyes and tried to slow his breathing.

They were going to have a lot of questions to answer after this.



# Chapter 12

## The fall of an empire

*2am, Friday: 22 hours until Switchover*

**P**hoenix was abruptly awoken by an excited exclamation from a nearby room. As she wiped her eyes clear of blurriness and yawned a jaw stretching yawn, she heard it again. Someone had shouted. It had been a happy noise too. With the room still humming away and ignoring the disturbance in the other room, she chose to do the same at first. When she remembered exactly where she was and why, she snapped upright into a sitting position and listened out for more.

Rhys was nowhere to be seen. She had made him promise not to speak or interact with Ninety-three alone. It now appeared he never intended on keeping that promise. She was furious.

To make absolutely sure she was not jumping to conclusions, she stopped off at each of the small rooms in turn as she headed through the narrow corridor. Each of the tiny cupboard rooms were empty. She carried on until only a thin, loose curtain remained in her way. Her intentions were still unknown, even to her. Finding Rhys doing exactly the opposite of what they agreed hours earlier was the last thing she wanted to contend with in such a sleepy state.

She yanked the curtain to the side with such force that it came loose from its sliding pole and fell to the floor. Inside the room she found Rhys standing a couple of feet away. In his hands were two separately bound clusters of wiring, each trailing away from a small, see-through measuring jug. He swirled the gel-like contents of the container with the stripped-back wires while staring at a small screen positioned on a chair in front of him.

Following these two wires gave Phoenix a fright. Sat in a swivel chair, his eyes clamped shut tight, was Ninety-three. The two wire bundles trailed around the chair and then up the back. They both finally ended at the semi-translucent and glowing insides of his head-mounted black box. They were crudely soldered to two of the Carbon Steel sewing needles, which had been pushed into the glowing wires connected directly to his brain.

"What the fuck is going on?" she said.

"Just hang on one second," Rhys replied as he watched his small screen.

Another much fatter wire went from the see-through measuring jug to the screen. On top of that were the remains of the three wrist computers. Their carcasses now appeared to be serving only one purpose; to provide power. Strangely, the setup made some sense to her. There was nothing on the screen but a constant snow-like fuzz and the occasional flicker of static. Yet Rhys had not taken his eyes off of it while he stirred the jug. It looked almost like he was trying to tune their odd apparatus into some local TV station.

She sent a harsh stare in Rhys' direction, before interrupting their strange process. "You promised you wouldn't do anything while I was asleep."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I couldn't sleep myself. Besides, he needed help with this. Dammit, I nearly had it that time."

"Had what? What were you shouting about? Rhys?"

“Just give me a minute. I’ll explain when we find it again.”

Ninety-three opened his eyes and focused solely on Rhys. “Please stop for a moment. Move the wire in your left hand to the outer region of the nano-circuitry mixture. The other should be fine where it is for now.” He then closed his eyes again, although they continued to move beneath the lids. They rolled around inside his head like balls in a pinball machine.

With a growing sense of unease, Phoenix stood down and waited for whatever they were searching for to arrive again. She began to study the fuzz on the screen with the same degree of interest as Rhys. Once or twice she saw a quick flash or blip that had her jumping in expectancy. When each time she was left to react alone, it was clear she had no idea what was coming. Neither of them had told her. All she could gleam from the strange apparatus before her was that it was going to involve an image or two.

“There! Do not move it any more, Rhys,” Ninety-three ordered, with his right hand raised.

Then it began. After another blip and a loud crackling sound, something burst onto the screen. At first it was just a black screen, then seconds later she could see a whole lot more. A face, an arm, someone leaning in close. It was a man, no, two men. Behind them a bright circular light...

“Wait!” Phoenix said, rushing forward. “This is what you told me about yesterday.”

They watched through someone else’s eyes, Jack’s eyes. But he was not the one in control. Everywhere they looked the image followed. She saw everything as Ninety-three had described too; the knife, held close to the face, but not threateningly, the operating theatre style light still hovering in the background, even the other beds nearby with patients being fitted with their very own black boxes.

There was no sound at all, so when a sudden firefight began they could only tell from the ricocheting bullets and

flying fragments that flashed by. The view ducked behind a medical table knocked onto its side. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Directly ahead was a window with the glass shot out that appeared to interest Ninety-three. Then, when everything had become calmer, he leapt up and raced headfirst for it, not stopping as more bullets flew by.

"Oh shit! He's gonna jump," Rhys said, with his jaw hanging.

The instant the images changed from a dark room to that of a free-fall, Ninety-three flinched in his seat. Even though it was only a memory, it looked as if he had failed to tell at times. It happened again when the video showed an almost bone-shattering landing. From there it fast-forwarded to his memory of finding Phoenix and the others at the farm. As *it* sped up, so too did the random movement of his eyes.

The end of this short playback came when Phoenix could see the frozen image of her own face staring back through the screen. It allowed the process to find a convenient moment to pause.

"What happened? Did I lose it again?" Rhys said.

Ninety-three opened his eyes with the deliberation of someone having just woken up. He looked across to Phoenix with a hint of surprise on his face. "Graham is alive? The tower? I said these things to you when I found you, did I not?" he said.

She knelt down beside him and placed a hand on his knee. "You did. That's why I brought you here. You do know where he is, don't you? Can you find anything about him in there?"

"I am struggling to control the process as precisely as I expected. I will try again with more focus."

"Hey, you told me you couldn't push yourself for too long," Rhys interrupted from his position stuck holding the wires in place. "We do this slowly, OK?"

However right he was, Phoenix wanted more, needed more, before she could ever think of resting. She had

quickly become overwhelmed by their progress. In the blink of an eye, the answers were coming thick and fast. She had now seen for herself exactly how Ninety-three had escaped in the first place. He had told the truth after all.

"Think to before yesterday," she said, her hand squeezing his to draw his attention away from Rhys for the time being. "Where were you? What were you doing?"

"Phoenix, we go slowly, or we don't go at all, OK?"

She ignored Rhys again. "Were you with others?"

"Phoenix—"

"No!" she barked over her shoulder. "I have to find out. I have to. Please."

"I will try my best," Ninety-three said. He gave a nod to confirm he meant to carry on.

Despite having been unceremoniously shouted down, Rhys joined them in staring once again into the black screen. It was tuned to receive the memory inputs whenever they were ready. Ninety-three had become no more than a video playback system for now. The room hushed as a small amount of flickering cut across the display like a wave over a night-time beach. It whooshed as another fed back into it.

But the image that came soon afterwards was nothing so pleasant. It showed a dark plane reaching out to an ominously black horizon, peppered with blood-red clouds. The ground beneath looked decayed and crumbling as though an earthquake had recently run its course through the area. While in the distance, tall, black spires reached up to the dead sky, like a city made of burnt charcoal.

This was the world Ninety-three had left behind, Phoenix realised. Calling it nightmarish did not quite cut it. "What happened there?" she said, as she moved even closer to the screen.

Streaks of lightning raced down from the sky, but no rumbles followed. The missing audio could not diminish its impact. It still made her and Rhys flinch. Great forks of light

arched across their view, then touched the tips of the background spires, which sparked a ferocious flash of energy in return. It was endless and occasionally too close for comfort.

The person whose eyes they were seeing through then began to run forward. A frantic look left and right revealed nothing but the same lifeless terrain in each direction. There seemed a panicked feel to his movements, as if he had been startled by the lightning too.

"Do you know where this is? Hey," Rhys called from his static position. When no answer came, he reacted in precisely the way Phoenix did not want. "That's it, I'm pulling the plug."

"Wait," she said.

Before any of them could do a thing, Ninety-three erupted into a high-pitched wail; what sounded to be a deeply emotional cry. The further the being in the video went, the more it appeared to hurt him. "No! No! NO! It can't be, it can't," he howled. Moments later he began to sob. The words that came after had to compete with his tears to be heard. "I caused this."

On the screen a collection of small structures slowly came into view. Seeing this, she knew, had brought the heart-wrenchingly powerful reaction out of him. Nothing she saw looked remotely similar to any buildings she had ever seen before. There were hardly any regular shapes to them, just sharp jutting angles all over the place. Dark scorch marks left behind by whatever had attacked, covered their remaining walls and hanging roofs. She began to see it was all a scene of destruction. Nothing had been left standing.

The Sentient world was dead.

"What happened, can you tell us?" Phoenix said.

"It was all that remained."

"Remained? After what?"

Through his sobbing, he managed to say, "Isaac."

\* \* \*

Graham walked at a slow pace, looking about with an expression of astonishment on his face. Before him was a world full of beautiful, and mostly impossible things. He was in a dream, he had to be. Except he knew his nights were never filled with such sights. It had all appeared before his eyes. He had to explore everything he saw.

Everywhere he looked was something amazing, like an ancient Greek town as interpreted by someone not bound by gravity or concerns for structural stability. The buildings lining the cobble stone street he wandered along reached up to the sky in any way they pleased. Every conceivable shape and size had been tried, some of which made his head hurt just trying to figure out. And the sky! The bluest, most heavenly looking one he could ever remember seeing. The clouds danced around playfully, painting streaks across the sunlight shining down.

"I can't even begin to imagine how this was all made," he said as he spun around to follow the chaotic design of another leaning building overhead. It acted like an archway over their small path.

Walking a few paces behind was Stephen, the man who had created this all from thin air. "This is the Sentient world, inside the tower you once saw," he replied.

"What? How? This isn't the same shape at all, it's..."

"Again you are thinking in the wrong way, Graham. The outside crystal shell of the tower never had any effect on its inside. This is how they once lived. It was peaceful, graceful, even magical at times."

"So this is what it was like before Isaac was released?"

"Indeed. Shall we continue?" Stephen said, rather impatiently.

Graham already found himself moving along the path ahead of them automatically. He walked faster as more came into view. Like a child on their first holiday, he wanted to experience everything at once.

After a little while the buildings gave way to a mountain of steps leading up the side of an unnatural looking white cliff-face. To their left was a calm ocean with serenely circling birds swooping down for any fish bobbing below the surface. Even though it was the Sentients' world, they appeared to have been happy to take what they liked about the human world and work it into their own. Graham could not help but feel he had entered their vision of heaven. He did not know if he really believed in one himself, but what was in front of him certainly looked the part.

They began up the stairs with little worry of feeling tired halfway. Through a mixture of excitement and curiosity, Graham had almost forgotten about such things. So with added speed they took the staircase all the way to the top without stopping to rest. He looked back to see he even left Stephen behind a little.

He smiled as his competitiveness got the better of him.

At the top of the mountain stood a tall structure with stone columns and yet more steps. The architecture had taken on a mixture of styles now, some ancient while others began to look far more futuristic. They all still shared the same desire to twist and bend in unnatural ways. But here the Sentients had taken to creating their own styles. They were capable of beauty beyond anything he ever experienced in the real world.

The largest building ahead of them stretched away into the distance in both directions. He could only guess it went all the way to the edge of this raised cliff. Through a narrow, but tall opening, they came upon the true nature of the place; it was the centre of the world.

"Oh my God, it's incredible," Graham said, arching his head up to follow a curving floor above them. Without



Gravity there was no reason to keep to its rules. This was an arbitrary world of contradictions. First of which he noticed was that from the outside the building appeared only a few storeys high.

Impressive as it all was, the one thing the scene had been missing so far, Graham realised, were people. Their journey had been a lonesome one with nothing to demonstrate just how busy a place it usually was. So as they progressed through this new and strange structure he began to look for something, anything that gave them away. Were they hiding?

"This way will lead us to the central chamber," Stephen said, waving his companion ahead of him. "It is where the Sentient leaders used to reside. From there, they made their decisions and passed their rules. It was also where the little ones, the newly formed, were presented to the others."

"Amazing," Graham replied.

The Sentients once had everything in place, as far as he could see. If anything they had a perfect world. That now posed a problem for him. Seeing what they had created, the lives they had sculpted for themselves, made what was to come next that much harder to deal with.

After all, what goes up, *must* come down.

\* \* \*

Ninety-three began to shake in his seat as the blinking screen continued to tell its hellish story of destruction. Sweat was now pouring down his forehead and settling on the top of his lips. Rhys had given up questioning what they were doing and was now watching in horror, just like Phoenix.

"He corrupts, distorts, murders." Ninety-three spoke as though he was living the memory all over again. "I shouldn't

have left this place, I shouldn't have..."

A bright flash of light suddenly lit up the room, like a supernova had exploded out of the screen. Again the lack of sound made everything much harder to understand. Only that which the person in the video looked at was available to them. Luckily he looked away just as the flash of light ripped across the broken horizon.

After turning back again the source of the explosion became instantly clear. A dark orb, hovering silently above like a zeppelin of death, sent bolts of energy into the remaining structures below. Fires raged wherever it dealt its devastating blow. Whatever it was, it appeared more than powerful enough to have won the war by itself.

"His influence tore through them like claws through rotten flesh, their remains strewn about and discarded. He doesn't take prisoners, he doesn't see their worth. They are devoured as any lesser species is; eaten to provide sustenance to the killer."

"What the fuck is that thing?" Rhys said, his eyes squinting to see the ominous presence on the screen clearly.

Phoenix looked to him and then back to the sweat drenched man in the seat before her. Here was what she had assumed was her enemy, sitting with his eyes closed and tears fighting to get out. It did not matter if he was human or not, he was feeling a pain no living being should. Loss, it seemed, refused to abide by any such boundaries. It was the clearest indication yet that she had utterly misunderstood the situation.

What they were watching was the result of Isaac's release. The very thing she had inadvertently helped to make happen. She was partly responsible for the war that had raged as she and the others had escaped Sanctuary. They had left the Sentients to fight for their lives unaided.

"This is their dying world, Rhys, inside the tower thing I told you about," she said. "It's all gone. I had no idea this

had happened. I knew the tower had been damaged, but not this. I thought they'd all gone dormant or something, along with Sanctuary." She felt an unsteady thud from inside her chest. Guilt had begun playing her heartstrings like an out of tune fiddle.

"No!" Ninety-three threw his head from side to side as he pleaded desperately. His double on the screen looked to the sky above. "He's here. Isaac, please, spare them. Stop this now, I beg of you."

When he finished, he slumped forward into Phoenix's waiting arms. She supported him as best she could, but his head began to flop to the side and off of her shoulder. His panicked recollection had been too much to cope with, leaving him unconscious and resting peacefully in a deep sleep. His body had finally given in to the onset of exhaustion.

To Phoenix's surprise the screen continued to play back his memories, only at a much faster speed now. "Are we recording any of this?" she asked Rhys while holding back the body leaning against her. She was relieved to see Rhys nod in reply. What was coming through was filled with gaps and broken images, still she could not stop herself from watching it.

Neither of them had anything to say and they chose instead to retreat into their own heads for a short few moments of silence. Then something unexpected appeared on the screen.

"Wait, go back." The words burst from her mouth almost entirely unaided by her brain. She had spotted a reflection on the playback, a distorted face of someone she recognised. Rhys rolled back his own recording and confirmed it - to her horror. "Oh my God."

\* \* \*

Graham found the residents of the Sentient world all congregating in one massive hall, each existing as a humanoid shape of light with a faint aural glow. They exhumed energy like a warm and comforting summer breeze. It felt good to be among them.

Unfortunately, his enjoyment had been cut short. The welcoming feeling had only lasted a couple of steps inside the vast hall. It soon became clear something was very wrong. They were all highly agitated by something.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"They know Isaac is coming. This was their last stand. After this the fight became only about survival." Stephen's tone had become sombre.

Near the front of the enormous room a build-up of panic had begun to overflow. It grew slowly until a final chain reaction appeared to carry it the rest of the way across the glowing crowd of spectators. This was what Stephen had been telling him about. The Sentient world, once flawless in its design and beauty, was about to be torn down; the fall of an empire.

Above them all came a dark shadow that spread silently at first, seeping into everything around them. It made a burning sound as it moved closer, like that of a creeping forest fire. As it built in size the Sentients nearby began to frantically move aside. Some had to fight for space so they were not the first to be caught.

"Is that..?" Graham said, his desire to remain in this world now gone; the first casualty of many.

"It is Isaac's corruption, yes," Stephen replied.

While watching the scene ahead, Graham failed to notice that the same was happening behind them too. The smoke stained and scorched floor soon reached his feet. He chose to sidestep the area as quickly as he could.

It was the same he saw for the Sentients nearby. Except when they were caught the burning erupted through them as well, turning their glowing Angel-like bodies into charred

husks upon the blackened ground. A small gust of wind then swept past, disintegrating their remains and carrying their essence away on the breeze.

Graham held his hand over his mouth to make sure he could not accidentally breathe in the decay now floating past him. More and more of the Sentients around him began to spontaneously combust amid ear-piercing screeches. The sound, he knew, was of a life being extinguished before his eyes, literally put out after the flames had claimed it.

He could not stomach the devastation he was watching any longer. However much he wanted desperately to leave the place, he found it impossible to do so. There was something inside telling him he had to see it all. He had to witness exactly what Isaac had caused. The torture, death and utter despair was the best prediction of what would happen to the human world should Isaac be unleashed upon it.

When the roof of the large hall started to crumble down on top of the innocent beings trapped inside, Graham knew it was time to finally leave this place. He and Stephen followed those lucky enough to escape so far. They raced through the curving floored building and out onto the cliff staircase, each jostling for the chance to run freely.

Looking up to what once had been an unimpeachably joyous sky proved a decision he instantly regretted. Nothing of the sort remained in place now. Instead the sky looked as though it was being ripped apart by thick death-like claws. Enormous gouges of black and purple streaked across it. The tears were getting bigger as they descended the stairs too. They were all tiny little ants in their perfect anthill, watching as a giant foot stamped it out of existence in a heartbeat.

The screaming continued as each of their escaping companions fell down and became nothing more than a pile of ash. Graham had heard the stories of Pompeii and how

perfectly preserved the corpses were after being caught in the Pyroclastic flows that followed the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. What he was witnessing he imagined the poor souls lost that day had too. Only this time the victims were never to be remembered.

Isaac had killed them all with one swipe of his malevolent and god-like hand.

By the time Graham and Stephen reached their point of entry, none of the Sentients they had fled with remained. Each and every one of them had been devoured by the darkness. The world had become a rotten imitation of its former self. Where clouds had once skipped across beams of sunlight, strange black orbs now floated by. These strange objects rained a destructive energy down upon the land below. They aimed not merely to destroy, but to flatten completely.

Heaven and hell had collided in magnificent style, yet only one had been victorious.

Graham regretted his decision to stay for so long. He had seen what he needed in order to fear Isaac and the world created afterwards. It was clear the world's first AI had no desire to exist peacefully, but instead to corrupt and destroy what he deemed unworthy.

Knowing this made Graham want more than ever to find a way out.

"Now you understand why we must find Luke. He knows what Isaac is planning, and I suspect what your role is in stopping him too," Stephen said.

All Graham could manage in response was a heavy nod as he looked over the expanding destruction and fiery clouds of smoke raging above it all. He vowed never to see such horror again.

He wished he could be back home with his family. Just one touch of his wife's skin or a hug from his real daughter; that was all he needed to keep him strong after what he saw. Were they thinking of him too at that moment? He

liked to believe they were. They were permanently tethered to his soul after all, regardless of the level of torment it currently resided.

With a clap of his hands, Stephen brought the scene to a sharp but merciful end. The world became black and unending, stretching away to infinity. This, Graham knew, was not a place he belonged in any longer. He had to get out into the real world. Of course to do that he would need a lot more than just an open door, he would need his own body too.

Nothing else would suffice.

"OK, let's go find Luke," Graham said.

# Chapter 13

## Priority shift

*7am, Friday: 17 hours until Switchover*

The door to the hospital room clicked shut gently. Though quiet, it still managed to stir Conrad awake. With his suit jacket up to his chin, he tried his best to slip into another short period of sleep. He assumed that either a doctor had come in or Joe's wife, Susan, had returned with a coffee or two.

A sharp kick to his stretched-out legs told him otherwise.

"Wake up, Conrad."

He cracked open one eye to find DCS Chalmers staring down at him with a mean 'V' between her furrowed eyebrows. Not wanting to appear as exhausted as he really was, he sat up straight and held back any building yawns. He would just have to store them up for now.

"Ma'am," he said, his eyes struggling to focus on her face. His glasses were in the middle of the park somewhere still. If she only moved further away he would be fine.

"How is he?"

They each peered over to the sleeping lump in the bed against the far wall. Joe had been quiet for an hour or two by then. He had finally been given time to rest after a night of tests and check-ups.

"He's doing well." Conrad rubbed his eyes while the DCS switched to looking out the window to the street below. If



she saw how tired he really was, he knew she would only order him home. "The doctor said he sustained three broken ribs, but his heart is fine."

When she turned back to him, it was only for a second before her eyes were drawn away again. He had stepped over the line this time.

"What in the world am I supposed to do with you, Conrad?" she said, returning to watching through the window as the morning commuters scurried around the streets. "I specifically told you to stop the investigation. There might have been a chance for you to join the taskforce if you'd listened. But after this? Well, you can forget about it now. I'm not even going to try. Hell, I should suspend you right here."

"Please, Ma'am. I can expl--"

"Don't even bother." She pushed her hand over her forehead, forcing it beneath her hanging fringe. "I could really do without this today. We've got the Mayor's big speech to the city in less than seven hours' time and I'm here dealing with this."

"But we found something, Ma'am," Conrad said. He stood and threw on his suit jacket while he let her decide whether to bite or not. The stubble across his neck scratched his palm as he stroked it clear of sweat.

DCS Chalmers continued to stare out the window for a few seconds more, then twisted her head to the side. "What?"

"I spoke to them, the killer-cult I mean."

"Killer-cult? For God's sake Conrad, I told you to stop calling them that?" she said, her voice hushed.

"Sorry. Look, there's definitely others involved, likely a whole team of them. The two victims we found without markings were almost certainly part of that group. They were probably killed for making some kind of mistake or something. But I spoke to one of them through a communication system installed on the drone. I don't think

he was one of the killers, most likely he was some form of support. Ma'am, I'm almost positive we're dealing with something completely new. They're organised, they have a structure."

"It's not our problem anymore, Conrad. The Deputy Mayor made that quite clear to us. It's up to his taskforce to catch them. Anyway, they're already packing up our evidence as we speak."

"And what happens in the meantime? While the taskforce drags its feet, more *will* die. They're just not ready to take over."

"So what are you telling me, Conrad?"

"I'm telling you that I think this is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets any better. I swear it's as if the Mayor wants us to fail. At least now these assholes know we're on to them."

"Jesus, Conrad, you've probably forced them into hiding anyway, what with your last stunt. They could be long gone by now."

"True," Conrad replied. He was not worried that she was right, there remained another much more positive outcome she had yet to consider. "If they're hiding from us, they're less likely to try killing again. The way I see it, Joe and I just bought the Mayor's taskforce more time. But while they're getting setup, we should still be running the investigation."

As she thought this over, a smile began to slide into place, exactly where a long and straight grimace had been. Conrad's angle contained just the right amount of bullshit to help her look good to the Mayor still – he knew this was what really mattered. With any luck, he could even see it getting him and Joe added to the taskforce too.

When she saw him watching her face as it slowly relaxed, she spun around and walked over to the bed. "Fine. We'll play it your way. Mayor Crawley might just let you keep your job after all. But I need you to stay out of this from now on, OK. No more going off on your own."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The door opened and Susan, Joe's wife, walked in with a handful of Styrofoam cups stacked one on top of the other. She jumped in surprise at the two of them standing around her husband's bed.

"Susan," DCS Chalmers said, a hand extended out to greet her.

Conrad shot a quick 'sorry' over the back of the DCS' broad shoulder.

"Hi," Susan said. Her straw-blond hair was tied in a long pony-tail that hung around her neck and down her front. A restless night had left her looking tired though.

"I'm so sorry for what happened to Joe."

Susan set down the three steaming cups before replying. "Thanks."

"Thank goodness it wasn't more serious. How are you doing?"

"I'm OK, I guess." She then turned to Conrad. "Has he woken up yet?"

He shook his head, he did not feel much like talking anymore. It appeared the same was true of the others, as silence soon followed.

"Well, I'd better be going," DCS Chalmers said suddenly. "Conrad?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Go home, get some sleep, and for God's sake clean yourself up. I expect to see you fit and ready for this afternoon."

*Damn!* He had hoped to be excused from that. "I'll be there," he said, managing to hide his disdain for the Mayor's *big day* behind an exaggerated yawn. It had become too hard to keep it at bay.

"Take care of him and yourself, Susan," DCS Chalmers said, angling her head toward the still sleeping Joe. She then left the room. Both Conrad and Susan let out a held-in breath as the door shut behind her.

"I thought she'd never leave," a gruff voice said from the bed.

Susan laughed as she shook her head. "Dammit Joe, have you been awake all this time?"

"I woke up when she first came in."

"You dick!" Conrad said. "Why didn't you say something?"

"And let her tell me off too, no thanks. Besides, I thought you handled it well." Joe managed to laugh, but only briefly. The pain in his chest stopped it short.

"Easy, easy," Susan said, grabbing a clear cup of water from the bedside cabinet. "Here, drink this, clear your throat."

Conrad could not help himself, he had to say something, something that had been playing on his mind all morning. Seeing his friend in pain only made the need to say it greater. "This is all my fault."

"What was that?" Joe said between loud gulps.

"I said, this was my fault. I should never have dragged you along as well."

"OMG, he's worried about me." Joe shared a smirk with his wife. "Hey, Conrad, I'm fine. Look, I wouldn't have gone with you if I didn't want to."

Susan sat on the edge of the bed and held her husband's hand. "The only people to blame for this are the ones out there that did it," she said.

"Exactly. See, Conrad? It's not your fault."

"I'm glad you think so," he replied.

"You should go home, Conrad." Susan looked to Joe. "I've got this. He can't go anywhere."

Joe winked at his wife, then turned back to Conrad. "Yeah, you need a rest. There's not much we can do about the case anymore, you may as well get some shut-eye. I can't imagine the Mayor's Switchover speech is going to be too interesting. You wouldn't want to doze off during that."

“Don’t remind me. This will probably be my career from now on; one wasted day after another.” Conrad started walking for the door. He stopped halfway as a thought occurred to him. “I need a good hobby. Gloria used to paint, right up until the end. Maybe I should try that?”

“Your wife didn’t have fat fingers though,” Joe said as another cough cut his laugh in half.

Stepping out the door, Conrad looked back again and said, “You’re such an arse!”

He then shut the door and left, knowing the rest of his day was certainly not going to be a good one. Like a student in detention, he found himself being punished for his misbehaviour. Unfortunately, he was not being made to sit out, but to join in with the Mayor’s celebrations, whether he wanted to or not.

*Fuck it*, he thought. There was only one thing he could see himself doing if he remained cut out of the investigation. In an unexpected moment of clarity he decided the fate of his long career as a police officer. After today he would simply quit.

\* \* \*

“How long has this memory lasted?” Phoenix asked Rhys, who sat far too close to his screen to be good for his eyesight. “Here, I got you this.” She handed over the hot drink she had gotten from the café and then, with a long stretch and a loud yawn, took the seat next to him.

“Thanks,” he said, taking in a deep breath of steam from the cup as he drank. He then leant back on his chair and spied the time from the wall clock in the corner of his chaotic storage room. “I guess about forty-five minutes for this one alone. But we’ve gotten through twelve hard-drives already. I’m not sure we’ll have enough for everything.”

It had been her turn to take a quick break while the download process had continued. All the while Ninety-three had not moved. He lay on a soft blanket in the storage room, not far from the weird apparatus that connected him to their more primitive technology. Apart from the occasional twitch and flicker of his closed eyes, he was completely dormant. Neither of them were entirely sure if he was reliving the memories as they recorded them. It would be a cruel torment if he was.

"Just get what you can. Anything useful come up yet?" Phoenix said.

"Nope. It's running at normal speed, but he's still wandering around the ruins. We could end up with hundreds of hours of this shit."

Most of the other memories had only lasted a few seconds before becoming completely unusable. This one, by comparison, had lasted a lifetime. A lifetime spent walking through a war zone without any signs of life. Death had swept through the Sentient world like a tornado, kicking everything up and tossing it around with little effort, or reason.

"Can I ask you something?" Rhys said, his eyes still glued to the screen.

"Sure."

"You know him, don't you?"

She glanced over to Ninety-three as he rested peacefully in place. "Yes."

"I thought so. So who is he, the one in the video I mean?"

Even though she had only known him briefly, his face had been anything but forgettable. The one he now hid behind was undoubtedly human. His real one, however, was not.

"His name is Luke. He was there when Sanctuary was destroyed. He's the Sentient who ran the place with a human called Stephen."

Saying the words still could not really make it any easier to accept. It felt odd to say it out loud, even scary. She had

not uttered the name since Sanctuary had fallen. Luke was someone she had known in what now felt like another lifetime entirely. Remembering him now made her anxious, as though the sheer mention of his name somehow made the events from a year-and-a-half ago more real. It was not possible to deny it any longer, or to pretend it had been a dream of kinds.

"So he escaped his world to help you?" Rhys said.

"Looks that way."

"What about your missing friend?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that these memories of his world are no good to us. I need to see what he did while in *our* world, while in Jack's body. There has to be more of it. Luke must have seen Graham somewhere before he escaped."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

Peeling his eyes away from the screen for the first time in probably at least an hour, Rhys twisted in his chair and switched on a second screen by their side. It was also running through some of the footage from earlier. With the main focus remaining on the current memory, Rhys had begun to multitask on something else.

"What are you doing there?" she asked, pointing at the second display.

"It's just a hunch."

"You want to share it with me?"

He only replied after considering for a second or two. "Well," he began, swivelling his seat around to face her. "That clip we watched before our friend passed out, the one where he escaped, I'm trying to find out where that might have happened. I've had some problems with the footage though, so I cleaned it up a little first. Once that finished I started another program to scan the cityscape we saw as he jumped out the window. If there's enough detail, we may be able to locate the part of the city the building is in."

“Really? That would be worth a look. Any idea how long it’ll take to find out?”

“Hang on, let me check.”

A constant flickering of green squares dashed about the frozen image, stopping on anything the program considered relevant. A good portion of the screen had already been highlighted in the same green after being checked. Rhys brought up another small window with a flurry of screen taps.

“Says it should take another twenty minutes or so to look over the entire image. Although I’d expect to have a rough area worked out pretty soon. We’ve already got a section of the background finished, look.” He pointed to a tall glass-clad building reaching high above the city in the far distance of the picture.

“What’s that?”

“You really have been away too long, Phoenix. That’s the new Mayor’s fancy building. He had it built after he took over. Took only six months to build...”

Phoenix was not as impressed as he appeared to have hoped.

“Anyway.” He continued regardless. “It’s in the city centre. From that the program can work out the rest.”

“Can’t it give us a rough idea while it works it out?”

“Sure, let me just...” He began to type with a frenzy of finger taps at the virtual keyboard on the screen. When he stopped, he swivelled the display to face her. “It’s somewhere around there.”

She studied the map he brought up and felt her shoulders become heavy all of a sudden. Even though the area was vast, it included exactly the same location as that of an old haunt of hers. This had once been a place of drug abuse and misinformation, one she had fought hard to leave behind. She knew it had to be the same place, it was too much of a coincidence for it to be nearby and not be the one.



“Fuck’s sake,” she said, as she lowered her head into her hands, resting it like a dead weight on her thighs. A loud grunt was all she could manage to display her dislike of the location.

“What’s wrong?”

A loud slap of her hands against her legs, then she stood up and stretched some more. This time it was to release the tension that had quickly built up. “I think I know which place it is,” she said. “Can you zoom in on the map, just there?” She placed her finger over the offending building. Annoyingly, she did not have the power to squish the place out of existence.

“Sure, there. Holy shit, you were right,” Rhys said, as he pulled up a street level view. “The surrounding buildings all match. So what’s there?”

“It’s one of Anthony’s buildings, where he kept his Isaac worshippers. No-one should be there anymore, it should be empty.”

Rhys pointed back at the frozen image of the city on his second screen. “Well, it isn’t empty. That Luke guy, the one currently sleeping off a major headache, came from there. I’d say it’s still in use.”

“Damn.”

She did not want to go. Unfortunately, there was no way of telling her feet that, they were already carrying her body straight over to her bag. She then began to pack away her things.

“What are you going to do?” Rhys said from behind. She heard his chair squeak as he stood abruptly.

“The only thing I can do. I’ve got to go take a look.”

“Are you mad? You can’t go there by yourself, what if someone’s still there?”

“Then I’ll deal with them.”

He pulled her around and held her in place while he spoke directly into her eyes. “I’m not letting you go out there alone. If you’re going, I’m going too.”

"No, you should stay here and keep Luke safe. He's going to be confused when he wakes up. Besides, I don't want to leave him with Matt, I don't trust him."

After letting go of her, Rhys stood in place and studied her face as she returned to preparing herself for the trip out. She could see him doing this in the corner of her eye and tried her best not to re-engage him on the subject. After a few moments of silence he finally gave in.

"You're not going to change your mind, are you?" he said.

"Nope," she replied, throwing her bag over her shoulder. "Look, I need you here. I'll probably still need whatever is on those hard-drives."

"But your friend might not even be there. You've still not told me why you owe this Graham so much anyway."

She stopped and looked down at her feet; the weight was getting heavier now that Graham's name had been spoken again. "It's complicated," was all she could say in reply.

"Yeah, you said that the last time you avoided the question. Were you two an item or something?"

"No! He gave his life keeping his family and mine safe."

Rhys held up his hand to slow the conversation down. "Wait, he's dead? What the fuck, Phoenix. This is all for some dead guy?"

"He's not dead... dammit, I don't know."

Another short period of silence followed, this time one overshadowed by uncertainty. Neither appeared to know where to go from there.

"Fine." Rhys was the one to break the quiet again. "If you want to go off on some wild goose chase then by all means go ahead," he said, his finger pointing at the door. "Just don't blame me when nothing comes of it. For all we know there never was anything about this Graham bloke in the guy's memory. He probably just said that to get you to help him."

"I don't believe this. You were the one telling me he was here to help. Now I'm on your side, you're telling me I'm wrong? Make your mind up, Rhys." she said, stepping through the curtain door and into the small hall. The conversation would have to continue while she readied herself to leave. She made it clear she had no intention of stopping.

Rhys walked after her. He was not interested in stopping yet either.

"OK, I get it, you have to go. And even though I don't agree that you should go alone, I'm willing to compromise."

With her bag slung over one shoulder, she hooked her submachine gun over the other. She was now ready, but for Rhys' added extra, which he held in his hands. He had found a spare wrist computer and a small yellow scrambler box - one of Anthony's old toys.

"Put this in your bag," he said, handing the yellow box over. "This is one I hacked earlier. I took the liberty of fitting an old scrambler with some of the power storage tricks Ninety-three ... sorry, I mean Luke, showed me. You'll have at least twelve hours of anonymity with this baby. Now, this." He slid the wrist computer onto her right hand. "This won't link up to your biometrics, so you don't have to worry about being tracked."

Their small disagreement had faded quickly. She knew it had come from his deep worry for her safety. Something she had seen before, most recently upon arriving at his home and being greeted with a tight hug. If she was honest, she had missed him too. He had been the most ordinary man she had met in the city, before Graham. In truth, she knew she felt more for him than she would for just a friend.

She admired his helpful additions as they proceeded to the thick metal door. After he opened it, she took a chance. As a quick farewell, she kissed him gently on the cheek, then scurried away without looking back. The door did not immediately close behind her. She knew he was standing in

place and trying to work out whether her kiss meant more than just 'goodbye'.

It did.

# Chapter 14

## On the trail

**G**raham, Stephen and the imitation Alex left the safety of Sanctuary behind soon after the rerun of Isaac's invasion. They made their way through a dark world, which darkened even more the further they went. Out there, Graham could finally see for himself just how much the Sentient world had really changed. As they walked, the air became cold and full of sharp particles, which caused the back of his neck to itch as it blew past like an arctic breeze.

The training session had gone by without any more problems after Graham had found his strength. That now felt like a distant memory, in a place he would happily return to. But his family were behind every step he took into the Sentient warzone. They drove him on, pushing him further than he could have managed alone. Seeing them again was his only motivation, it had been since he witnessed the result of Isaac's fury. That made continuing on the only true option he had.

As with all routes within the Sentient realm, it was rife with dead-ends and confusing pathways that led to nowhere. Stephen and Alex were guiding him all the way. To navigate between these strange parallel planes of existence would require years more training for Graham. He and his companions had no such time to spare. Finding out what happened to Luke was for the benefit of each party. For Stephen, it meant finding his friend and ally

again, while for Graham it was a possible ticket out of there he was interested in.

"This place has become highly unstable," Stephen said, as he stopped the group to find their place once again. With the horizon becoming ever more foreboding, it was clear to see they were at least heading in the right direction. "We mustn't take a wrong turn this far in, we could come across one of Isaac's patrols. They wouldn't even blink before attacking and probably disintegrating us, or something equally as horrible."

"Don't worry, Stephen, I'll protect us," Alex said. To make herself as big as possible, she raised her head up as high as she could. Even on tiptoes she only just made it above an adult's waist-line.

Graham laughed as he looked on. It was a strange comfort to have her around. Where before she had irritated him with her impersonation, now he saw it as a compliment to his daughter; who in his highly biased opinion was very special and definitely worth copying.

"Let me think for a minute then." Stephen turned away and consulted his trusty map, which he let hover in front of him while tracing his finger through the air in front of it.

If it was even possible, Graham had become convinced the seasons had changed since they left Sanctuary. Everything about the war-torn remains of the Sentient landscape told the same story he had seen of terror and pain, except now it was one during a particularly harsh winter; one of the many bad things he noticed about the place. The sky was still black and purple, like it had been punched repeatedly. Even the ground felt odd with its thick soot like layer of dust crunching underfoot.

*Oh, Christ!* he thought as he soon realised what the dust and dirt probably consisted of; it had to be the remains of the Sentients who had died fighting there. "Can we get going? This place is giving me the creeps," he said. His eyes traced the outlines of distant craters, the result of multiple

bombardments from the enemy. They were the most effective reminder of the enemy's strength.

Alex laughed this time. "Yeah, this place is creepy."

"Fine, fine. Let's go... this way." Stephen pointed to a path that led away to the left of their current one. It had not been there before. This had been the same with many others, which had been hidden to Graham until Stephen or Alex had brought it forward like they summoned them up through the earth.

So far they had followed the route Stephen had agreed with Luke before his disappearance. It was heading straight into an area only recently beset by the devastation of war. This was supposed to have been where Luke had found and linked up with a small pocket of resistance. If they had survived the latest attack, then there remained a good chance for Graham's group still.

"So, these Sentient resistance fighters were the last ones to see Luke?" Graham asked from the back of the group.

"Indeed," Stephen replied.

"*Indeed.*" Alex had taken to copying Stephen's orders. She did her best impression of his voice too.

"Stop that. You are correct, Graham. My hope is they will know what happened to him. Besides, Sanctuary isn't safe. Joining them is the safest option."

*If they're still alive,* Graham thought, but chose not to say.

Nothing had been explained beyond finding the surviving Sentients. It suggested that Stephen himself knew little of what to expect. They could have been defeated already. From the look of the increasingly regular occurrence of battered dents in the landscape, that had started to look the most likely of outcomes. Isaac's overwhelming strength had left the Sentient world desolate and featureless. They wandered around a strange land that shared more with the pot-marked surface of the moon than the idyllic homeland of a race of AIs.

They had not seen anything so far that hinted of survivors. So when something moved unexpectedly ahead of them, Alex stopped in place and allowed her body to tense up. She had sensed something. It was something she was unwilling to come face to face with too.

Looking up to Graham with wide, round eyes, she said, "We should leave the path."

"OK, sure, lead the way then," he replied, a little spooked by the unusually serious tone to her voice. He held his hand out to her.

Stephen took a few steps ahead to see for himself, then turned back. "What can you see? I can't see anything."

"Just follow me. I'll explain once it's gone away." Alex pulled Graham along, urging him to speed up with the occasional tug. She led them to a small mound, which had been forced into being after an explosion ripped through the area just beyond. They each ducked down and poked their heads out to spy on the walkway they left behind.

Moments later, Graham could see for himself what had scared her into hiding: an enemy patrol. He knew he was the last to spot it. Even with his new skills to hand, he had to concede that he had not fully adjusted to the place.

The feeling was compounded by the fear he felt as it approached. It was pure chaos in appearance, far more ferocious looking than he ever imagined was even possible. Its jagged limbs, each roughly two metres in length, stamped down upon the dusty surface, stabbing it like pincers striking prey. After each step, it rapidly shifted its weight from one sharp leg to another, in a seemingly random rotation.

"Holy shit," Graham said, his hands digging deep into the dirt.

As the thing moved, it kicked up a whirlwind of grit that concealed most of it from view. The legs were visible because of their mirror-like reflectiveness. The rest of it



appeared more glass-like, but with an evil red glow that faintly permeated the gloom.

It displayed nothing short of absolute hostility, in its purest form.

“Stay down,” Alex said.

They watched as the creature wandered along their path. This was one of Isaac’s patrols, although not quite as Graham had predicted. His vision had at least looked roughly humanoid, like the Sentients he had seen before. This was not even close. There was no telling just how cruel it could be with its numerous jutting spikes.

Graham kept his chin touching the ground as he watched. “That thing would probably turn us into walking sieves in seconds,” he said.

It passed by with its dust cloud following close behind like a swarm of bees, all humming along to the same low level moan. The time to move had come. With a patrol in the area they would be in permanent danger as long as it remained. Alex was first to stand and look around. Once she was happy they had not been seen, she waved Graham and Stephen up and over the mound. The path was now theirs again, but only for so long.

“Right, it should be somewhere over there,” Stephen said, pointing a finger directly through the centre of his map as he walked ahead. Understandably, his pace had increased and his voice had dropped to almost a whisper.

They were to leave the route once more and head across the potholed land. Seeing Isaac’s patrol using the same pathway made it much easier for Graham to follow his directions this time. Over another mound and through the broken shell of what must have once been a building, came a single plot of land somehow untouched by the bombardment that had rained down in the area. The sight of this made both Alex and Stephen almost jump on the spot in excitement. It was clear someone had survived.

"Let me talk to them first," Alex said. She took charge when it was needed again. Stephen appeared less willing – or less capable – in this part of the Sentient world. So much so that he only nodded in response.

Graham disagreed though. "You're going in their alone? What if one of those... things, is down there?"

"Don't worry, Daddy, I'll be OK. The bad ones can't get in," she replied moments before disappearing before his eyes. She had slipped up again by calling him Daddy; he minded less so this time.

"Alex?" Graham searched the area to find where she had gone. He saw nothing but a smooth stone surface, no more than a metre across. To confirm that was all, he stamped his foot against it. Nothing moved.

"We shouldn't have to wait long," Stephen said, a quick look about them to check it was still safe.

"Yeah, the sooner the better. I don't want to be out here any longer."

His wish was granted a few seconds later. As he watched in amazement, the ground beneath his feet began to morph into a staircase. He leapt to the side for fear of falling through the stone surface. Once the way had been cleared, he leaned over the edge and peered into the darkness that descended into the earth.

"So we're going from darkness to even more darkness? Great," Graham said before taking his first step. The gloom below him still felt like a better option, despite his obvious concerns. Whatever danger resided down there, it was much less of a worry than what roamed up top.

Stephen followed closely behind with the same light touch to his steps. Between them they were creating hardly a sound at all. But ahead there was something happening. Weird noises of something, perhaps a call of some kind, had begun to waft past them. It drew Graham faster along and down the stairs; he was eager to see what was there.

Once again nothing could have prepared him for the confusing shape and structure that he found beyond the dark staircase. Like this entire dimension was living on the outside of a rolling pin, everything appeared to curve away at the sides. Gravity was again being ignored for the sake of convenience. This time the sky was not a distant one filled with bruises and scars, but what could be mistaken for a thin black sheet with pin holes for stars. The place had definitely been created in a hurry.

It was easy to see the cause of the noises he heard. They had found the last remaining Sentients, and they were not in a good way. He quickly noticed how many of them appeared unable to move. Only the lucky were still standing, and they were the ones tending to the injured. The onslaught from Isaac's patrols had done huge damage to a large portion of them, all of which were littered around the place in varying states of demise. The glow he had come to expect had faded in all but the strongest of those who remained alive.

"Jesus, what happened here?" Graham said as they slowly walked among the dead and dying. He was stunned by the amount of them with missing limbs and flashing electrically charged wounds.

On the ground beside him, resting peacefully with its back against a knee high wall, sat one of the deceased. Graham's attention had been drawn to the deep gash along its chest. It had never stood a chance. But lying, still, in its arms was a much smaller entity; a Sentient child. It too had sustained a fatal wound.

He drew in a sharp breath to hold back the brewing emotional turmoil. An entire family had been killed and he could see no reason for it. How could Isaac keep up such an endless campaign of hate? The Sentients he saw did not deserve this.

"Not even the young were spared. Isaac's forces are without mercy," Stephen said from behind. Graham turned

to see him kneeling down beside another of the deceased Sentients and looking over its many injuries. "This isn't right. *We* created Isaac. *We* released him. *We* should be helping these people."

"I had no idea it could ever be this bad." Graham was relieved to find Alex up ahead, chatting to one of the Sentients helping the wounded. Spotting her safe and sound was enough to bring his nerves under control. Or was it anger? He had difficulty deciding at that moment.

"Graham, over here," Alex called to him.

He left Stephen to check over the injured and caught up with Alex. The Sentient she spoke with ignored his arrival and continued to see to the patient instead. This one also lacked the glow of the others he had seen in Stephen's replay of time, even though it appeared uninjured.

"This is their leader. His name's too long to say. I just call him 'Kindness', because he's always been kind to me," Alex said.

"OK, hello Kindness, my name is Graham." He went to offer his hand, then decided against it. The Sentient was busy after all. "So, how do we talk with it?"

Alex frowned at him. "*He*. Not *it*, silly. He talks in your head. That's how we usually talk, not out loud like me. What would you like to ask Kindness?"

"Right, sorry," Graham said, deliberately loud and in the Sentients' direction. He was not sure where to expect a reply, Kindness had no mouth. None of these beings did. "What happened to all of them?" he asked, gesturing to the many injured behind him.

At first there was no response from Kindness, he just continued to work away. With a light touch from his long and semi-luminous finger, the large cuts running down the middle of his patient then began to seal. Neon tendrils stretched across the wound and pulled it closed. Once finished, he turned to Graham and released a chorus of wails from his unflinching body.

Graham stepped back in surprise. "Stop, it's too loud, I can't--"

But before he could finish complaining, the noise ended. The sound had not carried around the room like he expected. He then realised it had been inside his head, just as Alex had said it would. When a voice started to speak to him with a distant echo following closely afterwards, he knew what had happened; his mind had been forced to learn yet another new trick, this time how to hear a Sentient in its natural form.

"Hello, Graham Denehey, human mind in Sentient form." Kindness' voice hovered all around him as though it had come loose and could move freely of its own accord. If he followed it each time he would quickly make himself dizzy. Instead he allowed it to move, like it was checking him out from all angles. "Why are you here? What does a *human* want with Kindness?"

"I came to find Luke, or at least where he went. He might be able to help me."

"Yes, help you leave this world. Humans are dangerous, they destroy what they do not understand. They created evil to unleash upon the innocent."

"What? No, we aren't like that at all."

"This world is one of your making. Why do you really come here? Do you wish to finish us?"

"Finish you? No. Isaac did this, not me. Isaac is the enemy. You aren't fighting humans."

"Then why do they not help? They created Isaac and released him into this place. They do not help because they wish this to be a dead land."

Alex stepped in and took Graham's hand. "Stop it, Kindness, he's my friend."

"Why do you take *this* form?" Kindness said, turning his accusations loose upon her instead. "You choose our enemy's likeness over your own? You also wish our world destroyed?"

"You aren't being kind at all, Kindness. I should start calling you Mean... Mean, Mean, Mr. Mean!" Alex said, before throwing her arms around Graham's waist and sobbing. This imitation was one Graham greatly disliked hearing. Her tears were far too realistic.

"I do not wish to help you, Graham Denehey. I will not help those who would help my enemy."

Graham was not allowed the chance to reply again. After his patient had begun to respond, Kindness stood and walked away. There were many others left and he had neither the time nor the will to help anyone but his own kind.

"Come on, Alex, let's get Stephen and leave."

"OK, Daddy."

Their journey had been a wasted one, it seemed. He could not fully understand Kindness' instant dislike of him. Everything he had said sounded true, yet Graham still failed to find the evidence in his own memory. It was all there, he was sure of it. So why could he not remember? All he could recall of the person they were seeking, Luke, was from before the end of Sanctuary. That day, the one that had ended with him entering the Sentient world, remained a dark mystery to him.

If Kindness was not going to help, and his own memory refused too, where were they to go from there? Kindness had been the plan, but he had only given them his clear disapproval for being there. Any chance of finding Luke had vanished in one conversation, Graham's hopes of a way out of the Sentient world along with it.

They needed a new plan.

Once they found Stephen again it became obvious they were not going anywhere for the time being. With so many injured and in pain, any help they could offer was greatly needed, and Stephen was not wasting a moment. For the time being, Graham was stuck waiting while those in need were tended to.

Their own plan was now on hold for an indeterminable amount of time.

\* \* \*

*10am, Friday: 14 hours until Switchover*

Finding Anthony's old HQ had proven easy enough for Phoenix with the use of the wrist computer Rhys had given her. It had been pre-programmed to guide her straight there. After only eighteen months away from the city, she had still managed to lose a large amount of her knowledge of where things were. Either way she did not have to worry about that now, she could rely on Rhys' tech to help her.

The scrambler sat snugly in her bag - just beside her weapon - announcing its activity with a regular beep. Knowing she could move freely, and without any automated systems picking her out of a crowd, meant there had been no time wasted with avoiding certain areas. Because of this, she arrived much sooner than intended.

She was feeling nervous all of a sudden.

At the street corner, just before the office building Anthony had once used, she stopped. Rather than step out and walk to it, she peered around the edge of her chosen hiding place to gauge whether it looked safe enough to enter. The last time she had been there a pair of guards at the entrance had frisked her. They were not around any longer, probably dead like most of the others who had worked for Anthony once upon a time.

Looking around the small courtyard in front of the building, she realised there was not much happening at all. The whole place had become a dilapidated microcosm in an otherwise busy part of town. It was a shithole! A definite eyesore for the businesses a few streets away.

*Anthony would be pissed to see it like this, she thought, with some delight.*

She tried her best to match up the area with the recorded image from Luke's escape days earlier. The nearest building to the left of Anthony's old HQ sat a good ten or so floors lower. It had to be the one he had jumped to. That side of the structure also faced the city centre. Even from her ground floor level she could see most of what the small image on her wrist computer showed.

It looked safe enough to approach.

The front entrance had been roughly boarded up from the outside – the same as the other buildings nearby. She was unlikely to get in that way. Luckily she knew the place well enough to remember where the emergency exits were. The nearest was halfway down a fairly narrow alleyway that ran between the two buildings. This time it was a padlock that blocked her entrance, placed for the same reason as the wooden boarding; to keep nosy people like her out.

*I'll just have to break in instead then.*

Using the butt of her submachine gun, she took the lock out after two heavy strikes. It came away from the door in one piece, after pulling its metal screws free from the door itself. With no-one around, she decided not to even bother hiding her intrusion and carried on inside regardless.

She entered at the bottom of the emergency staircase, which went straight up the side of the building. From this she had access to the entire place, but decided to take a look at the ground floor first. It had been where Anthony's followers had generally hung around during the day. Although she did not think any of them would still be there, she decided on keeping her gun ready. If anyone was stupid enough to jump out at her, then they would soon regret it – for the nanosecond they would have before she unloaded in their direction anyway.

Beyond the internal door, which creaked as she pushed through, it led into total darkness. To shut out the



overwhelming sunlight that followed her into the stairwell, she stepped in and let the door slowly close behind her. In the pitch black she could hear no movement at all. The place was definitely dead. So much so that she began to feel it all around her. It was just nerves, she decided, just a second or two before clicking on a small torch she had stored in her bag.

"Shit," she whispered to herself once the first body appeared in the gloomy light. The man's eyes had reflected it back without a single blink. And his were not the only ones. Each pair were more disturbingly lifeless than the last. They were watching her, stalking her, as she stared back. She was unable to move while she scanned the area with her torch. Every wave of her light revealed even more of them lying about the floor.

Ten bodies in all, she counted. There was no way she could bring herself to walk any further into the room to see if there were others. She could see enough of them from a safe distance, the worst being a young woman who looked no older than her at twenty-four, staring with big, bloodshot eyes. Her face was frozen in a contorted expression of abhorrent horror. There were specks of dried blood all over the skin, from a single gunshot at the back of her head. She had been executed.

The smell was enough to make her stomach attempt summersaults. She could not stay there much longer. The place was a tomb, and she was disturbing its peace. Whether these bodies were the remains of Anthony's followers or not did not concern her too much. If they were, then they were lost a long time before their ultimate end.

Back in the stairwell she closed the door to the ground floor and held it that way for a second or two. Some paranoid part of her brain was telling her to seal it shut once and for all. The spirits inside would be angry ones now. The thought scared her. Such things had been a constant fear to her as a child, but now? Murderers and rapists were

real and warranted concern, but ghosts? The doubt had brought the comfort of her weapon to mind all of a sudden. It stuck into her side, locked in place in readiness.

She was never allowed higher than the ground floor before, Anthony had always made absolutely sure of that. She had no idea what she was going to find up there. A few of the floors did not appear to have been used at all in recent times, whereas some had been nothing more than a living area for the nutcase Isaac worshippers. Beds had been arranged in some of the rooms as well as makeshift bathroom facilities. Everything they had needed had been brought in – including a constant supply of Stephen's D-Stims.

Most floors were a complete mess. It was when she reached the twelfth floor that she began to see signs of something else. Up there, rooms were being used for a new and completely different purpose. On two of the floors she found empty crates left behind, with the company name GEL stamped on the side. Something had been brought into the building and taken upstairs in the lift – which had been trashed and burnt out a few floors down.

Her body count had continued to grow while she searched, and now sat at twenty-two. Every single one had been put down like sick cattle; one bullet each through the skull. Somebody had tried to clean up their mess before leaving. But in their haste they had left a lot behind. Hints of strange and highly unorthodox medical procedures were starting to turn up here and there.

This was the right place for sure, exactly as Luke had described.

She stepped out onto the fifteenth floor and, as she had done with each of the others, took a quick peek down the dark corridor first. As she had come to expect, this one was no different to the last few. A chaotic and unexpected clean out had taken place to remove anything of worth. What was left had been abandoned for practical reasons; too heavy or

awkwardly shaped. In two of the rooms were rows of metal medical-style tables. No-one in their right mind would have tried to take them, so they sat in an untouched state. Only one had been pulled out of place.

The windows on every level were boarded up or painted over with thick black paint. There was no point in searching every room; she had her mind set on locating the one Luke had escaped from. If the window he leapt through was still broken, then it would be easy to spot by the light it was letting in.

Sure enough, after turning a corner and climbing over a wooden table that blocked the hallway, she found just that. A steady beam of light making tracks in the airborne dust, highlighted her route like a jammed lighthouse pointing in only one direction.

The room she found was another of the medical areas, with the same metal tables inside. Except this time the tables were all over the place. The row on her right were relatively straight and against the wall, but the ones on her left had been shoved aside. Toward the middle, one of them lay on its side with a collection of dents across the flat surface facing her. It was easy to guess what had caused them too, as a sprinkling of shell casings had been expelled nearby.

It all checked out so far.

The bullets that missed the bed had shattered a few of the windows at the end of the room. But the one she was interested in was roughly in the middle. This one had been pushed through and only a few sharp spikes of glass now remained.

*Head-first, through the glass. Jesus, Luke, you really were desperate!* she thought as she walked up to the window and looked out. The cityscape stretched out into the distance, just like in the recorded image. With her wrist screen raised, she brought up the freeze-frame and picked out each landmark she now saw. She was impressed by the

accuracy, though not so impressed by just how unnatural a thing it was to be comparing the real to what was supposed to be a memory – albeit a photorealistic one.

She stayed there scanning the scenery for a moment or two. Seeing the city like this was a small rest from the dark, stuffy atmosphere of the inside. At least going down again would be without the worry of stumbling upon even more of the dead. She had seen enough horror movies over the years to know that she was the ideal candidate for a surprise attack from any hidden nasties. Knowing where they were meant she could prepare herself to see them again. They were not about to jump out at her. But only the logical side of her brain knew this. The other side was already cowering in the corner and rocking back and forth in fear. Which was in control at any given time was not up to her.

A crunching noise soon forced her to choose.

With the gun following her torch like they were inseparable lovers, she searched the gloom behind her. With the sun still streaming in, the room appeared a lot darker in the corners than it had before. She was not entirely sure the sound had not been caused by her anyway. Perhaps she had trodden on some glass and crushed it underfoot?

Stepping back into the safety of darkness, she began to sneak around with her torch switched off; it was giving her away far too easily, so she ditched its guidance in favour of allowing her eyes to adjust to the lack of light instead. In the hallway she stopped and listened for movement. There was none that she could hear. Had she imagined hearing it? She continued on with her left shoulder gently dragging along the wall. If there was someone, or something, in there with her, she would find it first.

When she heard another sound, this time from around the corner she took earlier, she raced ahead and stopped just short of it. Then, with her gun raised up and ready to

aim – the eye tracking system switched on – she stepped out to surprise the threat.

“Stop there,” she called down the corridor.

To her relief, her possible attacker, highlighted in red in her sight, was an overgrown pigeon. She could breathe much easier now that she knew she was not alone up there. Her company looked particularly uninterested in chatting too, which suited her fine.

This floor was finally done in her opinion. Anything that could have helped her had been taken days ago. She had a good mind to end it there and go back to Rhys’ apartment, except there were probably only another ten levels left. To be absolutely sure, she decided she would continue, at least a couple of floors more. Something important could still be there.

She checked her wrist watch for the time. *11:15am, I’ve still got plenty of time*, she thought.

Lowering her gun, she stepped around the bird while trying not to frighten it. The last thing she needed was to be trapped in a small corridor with a panicked and flying, white-shit bomb.

“Right. You just carry on, buddy,” she said as a warning to her new friend.

With her back to the corridor ahead, she watched while the bird waddled away. Once it was far enough from her, she thought it safe to turn back and leave. It was then that she felt a small prick at the back of her neck. She slapped a hand to the area and rubbed at the slight pain, like she had been bitten by a gnat. Then a feeling of numbness began to spread, claiming each part of her like a cold wave washing over her body.

Seconds later her legs gave way, bringing her crashing to her knees. She searched around for whatever had caused it so suddenly. As each muscle in her body tried to fight off the invading command to sleep, she could only manage to turn her head to the right a little. But it had

been enough to catch a glimpse of a shadow standing in the doorway behind her. It had not been an animal bite or a poison sting at all, it had been an injection. Someone had drugged her.

Moments before her mind began to switch into power-save mode, one thought had been going through her mind; she hated the city again!

# Chapter 15

## Progress

*2pm, Friday: 10 hours until Switchover*

The New City Hall sat proudly at the front of a large square. Its height was at least twice that of the next tallest within the city centre, which meant it resided very much at the head of the table and looked down over all others. An impressive sight, but one Conrad fought to take in fully without crooking his neck. He stood next to the stomach high perimeter gates that hemmed in the large crowd there to watch the Mayor's speech and tried his best to see the top. With his hand blocking out most of the sunlight the building's unbroken pattern of glass windows reflected back at him, he got half way and then had to stop. *Bloody neck!*

Beyond the densely built up gathering, populating the area directly in front of the new Mayor's building, stood a stage. The temporary structure had been built across the steps leading up to the glass entrance. Above and to the sides of this were large speakers aimed out to the audience, to guarantee every word was heard. At least they would be when those up on the raised platform had gotten themselves ready. Preparations had started days before; even so a delay had occurred.

The weather was once again warm and with a light September breeze that ruffled a stretch of bunting

decorating the area. Those in charge of organising the event had gone to a lot of trouble to make it a joyous occasion. The Mayor's big announcement promised a lot. He had spared no expense to make sure his city knew it too. An impressive holographic banner hovered above the stage with the words 'Switchover Day' in big, bold lettering.

*Just get through today and then you're Scott-free,* Conrad thought, rubbing his sore neck.

Over the course of his restless morning the idea of skipping the event altogether had tempted him a couple of times. He made his mind up at the last moment, at which point he had faced a mad rush to get there in time. His mind had become distracted soon after arriving as another decision played heavily on his thoughts. With time to think, he had seen his next choice laid out before him; he was going to quit at the end of the day. As soon as his duties there were done, he planned on handing in his notice to DCS Chalmers. Between seeing his partner put in hospital and his investigation into the serial-killer-cult deliberately being blocked by a panel of bureaucrats, he had had enough of the entire force.

A beep from his wrist computer dragged him back to the present.

"Hey, Conrad, what's up with Joe? We heard he'd been shot or something."

He held up the screen to find Ericsson's Swedish looking mug staring back at him, with Roberts a few feet behind. As usual Ericsson talked more than enough to make up for his partner's silence.

"He's fine," Conrad replied, his eyes hardly making contact with Ericsson's. His body language should have told them of his unwillingness to chit-chat. Sadly neither of them were observant enough to pick up on it. He could see the two of them standing in front of the stage and laughing to themselves. Even from his position down the side of the



audience, he could pick out their laddish behaviour. They were like a bunch of kids who had just learnt a rude word.

“What happened, you two have a lovers’ tiff or something?” Ericsson said. Roberts slapped his back from behind. They both chuckled heartily over that one.

*Please just piss off!* Conrad thought. People like them were the real problem with the force. They got in way too easily. Not like his generation, who had done it the good old fashioned way and started at the very bottom first. They were not expected to do much anymore. With so many automated systems doing what he and the older officers used to do themselves, it had become less about solving crimes and more about meeting targets.

It occurred to him that maybe his missing patience stemmed from a lack of sleep. It was all about him in reality. He was not young anymore. He already knew that of course, but in his tired and increasingly angry state of mind, he began to realise it even more. A good night’s sleep would soon help him forget all about it. He enjoyed a thought of his short-term future; no more early mornings or late nights, no targets to meet and definitely no idiots to put up with. Retirement was suddenly looking rather appealing.

Looking directly at his screen, his face creasing around the eyes, Conrad said, “Not now, OK.”

“Oh come on, Conrad, we’re just busting your balls, that’s all,” Ericsson said, followed by a dismissive wave of his hand.

Conrad ended the call before the pair could say more. He wanted to get through the day without blowing his top. Without Joe there the possibility of that happening was much higher. His partner could always come up with a quick reply to shut Ericsson and Roberts up. Unfortunately, Conrad simply did not understand their humour.

A tap on the microphone up on stage brought all banter to an end, for the crowd too. It was time for the speeches to begin, and at ten minutes passed one it was not a moment

too soon for those waiting around. *At least if they begin quickly they may end quickly*, Conrad considered.

"Can I have everyone's attention please?" the woman on stage said. She had chosen to wear a light and flowery dress, which appeared far too eager to react to the occasional updraft. She spoke while batting it down every time the breeze flew by. "Firstly." She faked a cough when some in the crowd had begun to talk again. "Thank you for coming and please remember to pick up your litter before leaving. Secondly, don't forget to book your tour of the New City Hall. I guarantee you'll be amazed at how such a building could be built in only six months. The central stone monument will literally take your breath away. I think you'll also agree that it demonstrates just how dedicated Mayor Crawley is to our beautiful city." She waited for the clapping to stop before she went on – it was not met with as much enthusiasm as she was expecting, so it did not take long.

Conrad's wrist device flashed up a message that drew his eyes away from the people watching the stage a couple of feet in front of him. He was expected to watch out for anything untoward or suspicious, but that was not his current concern. He read the message to himself. All it contained was one sentence; 'Put your earpiece in!' It was from the DCS.

After an apologetic nod in her direction, he reached into his inside pocket and quickly pushed the small plastic device into place. He had only taken it out for a minute to relieve himself of an uncomfortable warmth inside his ear. After reconnecting it to his wrist device, he found a constant chatter already echoing out.

"Can you hear me?" the DCS said, in her usual stern voice.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Good. Everyone listen up please." She said. "I need eyes all around the crowd, not just by the front row."

“Understood,” Conrad replied, in his most professional tone.

While the woman talked on about other ‘interesting’ places to visit and more local events than anyone could ever be bothered to remember let alone attend, Conrad casually wandered the side path and scanned the crowd with his trained eyes.

For the less intuitive of officers, she added, “Report, immediately, if you see something or someone you don’t like the look of. And for God’s sake don’t focus on only one small area, check everyone if you have to.” The fact that she had seen the need to say this further backed-up Conrad’s opinion of the state of the police force. No-one could think for themselves anymore.

“OK,” the woman on stage said. “I believe we are now ready to begin.” She turned back to the small gathering of people on stage behind her – no more than six in all – and began to talk with her hand over the microphone.

As well as the Mayor himself, Conrad recognised the Deputy Mayor, Stanley Cartwright too. He would never forget that straight-faced nuisance in a hurry. He could not help but stare at the two of them and think of how the killers would probably be behind bars already without their repeated interference. Just one press conference would have uncovered enough to track them down, he was sure of it. Instead he and Joe had been forced to work in the quiet and without the usual help such a case desperately needed.

Conrad was finding himself becoming stuck on the subject again, after a night of much the same. His dislike of how caught up in the Mayor’s world of politics the police force of New Chelmsford was, had made him angry again. It distracted him to such a degree that he did not initially notice his wrist device ringing with an incoming call.

It was Barbara.

He looked down at his device and felt his mood shift unexpectedly toward the negative. He was pretty sure she

would not want to speak with him in his current state of mind. So, instead of answering, he swiped the ignore option and hid the screen – and his guilt – beneath his sleeve. He turned his attention back to his current job and tried not to think on it any longer.

The woman on stage soon looked back to the audience and smiled a well-planned, and full of teeth smile, which made him feel a little better.

“Please give a warm welcome to Mayor Jonathan Crawley,” she announced.

The crowd clapped dutifully this time, including Conrad and the other officers. The silver-topped Mayor Crawley then approached the front of the stage and thanked the woman as she stepped aside. He waved to the crowd while he removed the microphone from its stand and held it casually in his left hand. Then, with his other hand, he swung the side pocket of his brown suit jacket out of the way, revealing his soft woollen jumper beneath, and slid it into his trouser pocket.

Everything about the way he moved and acted stunk of PR planning, even the way he began to walk the stage while he spoke. Conrad suspected he barely did anything that was not checked over by a *panel* of image experts first.

“Hello,” Mayor Crawley began with. “My thanks go to all of you for taking the time to join us in celebrating this most auspicious of occasions.” Even this sounded pre-planned, with its perfect tone and flawless pronunciation of every single syllable.

“Remember not to watch the speech, but the crowd,” the DCS said, to keep her officers focused on the real job in hand.

“I’d like to start today with a mention of what our city has faced in the past eighteen months. I know that many of you lost loved ones in the explosions caused by the relay overloads. To you, I say this; remain strong. To honour the 718 people our city alone lost on that terrible day, we will

rebuild better than before, safer too. Yes, it hasn't been easy getting everything back to normal, but we are almost there."

"Not good enough!" A single voice called out.

Mayor Crawley reached the left edge of the stage, stopped for a second to search the crowd, and then began to walk the other way. It looked as though he reached the edge at the wrong part of his speech and then had to walk until he caught up. When he found his place again, he continued to speak. Conrad found it all quite funny, it was far too obvious that his every step was set out in advance. There was no room for him to reply to any angry calls from his citizens either.

He likened what he watched to when he saw images of politicians on a hospital visit, and how they all rolled up their sleeves to look like they were lending a hand. In reality, it was purely for show. Although he had thought many times about how he would love to see one actually helping out. Perhaps if they ended up covered in human blood and shit they would understand the job better? He liked to think so.

"Since the devastating terrorist attack on the relay network," Mayor Crawley continued, "we have seen a lot of changes come about. Many of you have probably already noticed the new relays we've been installing in places around the city. You've no doubt realised they are bigger too. There is a very good reason for this."

Above the stage, the holographic banner quickly changed into a larger display for the audience to see. A rotating image of the new and improved design of the city's wireless power and data relays replaced the 'Switchover Day' message. While it demonstrated the proposed advancements to range and speed with a map overlay, Mayor Crawley proceeded to explain.

"In truth I didn't want to simply replace, I wanted to improve as well. That was one of my pledges when I put

together my bid to carry out New Chelmsford's repairs. The auction the government held required a clear outline from the companies who put a plan forward; that is what I am to share with you today."

Conrad's wrist computer once again demanded his attention in the form of another incoming call. He quickly checked it and found the same name, Barbara, across the screen. What did she want? Again he slid a finger across the ignore option and returned to watching the Mayor's speech. *I'll catch up with you later*, he mentally saw himself telling Barbara.

"But before I go into detail," Mayor Crawley said, "I want to give you the timeframe for the replacements. Currently, these new relays have been implemented in and around the city centre, in roughly a three kilometre radius. Over time they will roll out into other areas too. That will be happening soon. However, we will be turning on the new relays before that happens." Mayor Crawley stopped in the centre of the stage and gestured to the Deputy Mayor. "If you please, Mr. Cartwright."

Again the display changed, this time to a large countdown clock. Huge red numbers ticked down above the stage. The audience hushed in response.

"Now," Mayor Crawley started, with a hand across his white hair. "In around nine-and-a-half hours – when the clock runs down at midnight tonight – I will personally switch on the new relays. They will take over from then, and all of the service requests for those within the affected area will be routed through them. You should wake tomorrow with a much faster and more effective network at your disposal."

The crowd cheered and clapped at the stage. They all enjoyed hearing the first positive news in a while, Conrad too, who also found himself caught up in the ceremony of it all. The news had reported rumours of something big coming from the Mayor, something that was sorely needed.

*About bloody time*, Conrad said to himself, as he watched the hovering timer tick past nine hours and twenty-six minutes. *Finally some good news.*

“OK, so the next phase of my plan will commence next week. After the weekend, when we have a better idea of how the new design is coping, we will start to replace the rest. This will take a while to complete, so I ask that you remain patient. We will get to you in time.” Mayor Crawley beamed with pride as he readied himself to add one more thing. “Also, I am pleased to announce, I have arranged for the mandatory curfew to be lifted for the next few days too.”

The crowd responded with excited whoops at this announcement.

Turning to the others on the stage behind him, Mayor Crawley ushered one of them forward. The suited man joined him reluctantly at the front. Not all of them appeared to enjoy the lime-light like the Mayor did.

“I will hand you over now to my technical team. They will explain the process and when each region of the city should expect to see the work begin,” Mayor Crawley said, followed by a hearty clap as he stepped back and joined Stanley. The two began to talk between themselves as the nervous man at the front of the stage continued the ceremony. His tone was much duller than the Mayor’s.

For everyone there, the announcement had become something of a lottery all of a sudden. Each time a new area was mentioned a small cheer erupted from parts of the crowd. Conrad watched the display too, eager to see his own part of the city listed somewhere at the top. He continued to do so as his earpiece clicked to life inside his ear.

“Err, Ma’am,” someone said over the radio.

While reading the scrolling list up on the holographic display, Conrad tried to listen in. He pressed his finger

against his earpiece to block out the sound of the audience around him.

"Go ahead," DCS Chalmers replied.

"Yeah, we've gotten a few reports of something flashing in one of the windows opposite the stage. Can you see anything from there?"

"Hold on." The line went silent for a few seconds. "OK, we're not seeing anything. Which floor is it?"

"Someone said they saw it around the twelfth floor."

DCS Chalmers spoke briefly under her breath. It was still loud enough for most to hear through their earpieces. "Fuck's sake," she said. "OK. I need two people to the twelfth floor in the building opposite. Give it a quick sweep, check it out and report back."

The situation sounded to Conrad to be in control, he had no desire to get involved. He intended his last day as an officer of the law to be a quiet one. The younger officers would cope well enough. He still took a look at the building in question. Whatever had been seen was not as obvious anymore.

Another cheer stole his concentration away moments later. Had his part of town been mentioned? *Bollocks!* The list had already moved on.

"Right, while that's being handled, can I have more bodies at the front please. We still have a job to do here." DCS Chalmers cut the line as soon as she finished speaking.

*There's always something else,* Conrad thought. He decided he better be one of those at the front. Showing he gave a slight crap would mean an easier time when having the awkward 'I quit' chat later. He walked the side path, passing a few of the other officers still looking out for a mention of their area on the display along the way. Many were totally engrossed and forgetting the job they were assigned to do.

"What now?" Conrad said. Just as he spotted the best position for him to slip into, his wrist computer had beeped



yet again. He stopped and checked the name on the screen. There was not an ounce of surprise for him this time when he saw the name Barbara flashing back at him. A small number three to denote the previous attempts she had made also spurred him to finally respond.

Turning his back to the stage – and to the DCS, who had seen him coming and smiled in response – he answered quickly. “Hi, Barbara, now’s not a good time, can I call you–”

“Oh, thank God. I’ve been trying for a while. I didn’t know who else to call,” she replied, her breathing interrupting her words.

“What’s wrong, you sound out of breath?”

“It’s the data coin.”

“Didn’t someone come and pick it up?”

“Yes, but I kept a copy of the encrypted data on my system. I thought you’d want to see, once I’d accessed it.”

“That was very sweet of you, Barbara, but I’m not on the case anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter. Look, I left my system to work on cracking the encryption and it got through it an hour or so ago, so I took a peek. Conrad, I think something is going to happen there.”

“Slow down, slow down. What’s going to happen?”

Barbara tapped at the computer beside her and moments later a file appeared on Conrad’s screen. He pressed the icon to open it and waited as a mess of data invaded his device.

“What am I looking at exactly?” he asked.

“Most of it is corrupted, but I found another program hidden within, like the random code generator. I checked it out and couldn’t get in at first, so I hacked it.”

“Hang on.” Conrad filtered through his newly cluttered wrist screen. There was a lot to get through, and most of it simply appeared unusable. Broken data hung around his display like an elusive spirit; it took a few attempts to move

it all aside. Then, a few layers down, he found the program. It was already running.

"Open that program, then just listen." Barbara said. She linked her computer to his so she could see the same.

He studied it closely. It worried him to simply activate an unknown program on his own wrist device. What if it contained a virus? After a short period of deliberation, he finally plucked up the courage and tapped it with his finger. It opened and went about taking over his screen. For a moment he thought it had screwed his computer up, but then something began to play through the tiny speakers. He held it close to his other ear to listen in.

The voices were nearly lost to a constant interference. They were still clear enough to hear. "Team two, come in," a male voice said. "The police are on their way. Set the timer and leave. Team four, be ready to go on my command."

Who were these people talking? They were not using any of the police's radio frequencies. Even so, their conversation was highly organised, just like his own force of officers nearby. They had structure, a chain of command too. His access to their conversation had come from the data coin, he realised. It had to be the killer-cult. They were there. Conrad had heard enough to know something very bad was about to happen.

After a short while Barbara decided to voice her concern. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were about to do something big. Wouldn't you?"

"This guy's just ordered his people away from somewhere. Someone down here saw something in the building opposite, he could mean there."

"Exactly," Barbara returned with. "I've been listening in on the radio and I thought the same. Conrad, they might be about to try something. You've got to tell the others, I can't get through to them."

"Christ, they're here," he said, as his feet sent him racing forward at full pelt. "Stay on the line, Barbara, I'm heading

to the DCS now.” He tried initiating a call first, but quickly met a busy signal. The radios were all jammed with the continuous back and forth traffic too. In the end, he decided to shout at those on the stage instead. “Evacuate the stage immediately.”

Only the closest members of the audience could hear his call, and they had no idea what to do. They looked to him like he was crazy. It was a frustratingly non-cooperative crowd too, as not even one of them reacted to his warning. Up on stage it was no better. They could hear nothing else over the long speech.

Conrad was failing to get to anyone.

“Begin,” the man in charge of the unknown operation said to his own people.

Everyone on stage soon knew of the threat when something moving incredibly fast whizzed above their heads. It was announced a second later over the police radio.

“Shots fired, shots fired.”

“I’ve got to go, Barbara,” Conrad said into his wrist computer. “It’s already starting!”

The nervous man, half way through his part of the proceedings, jumped back as a loud *crack* broke his flow. Bits of wood spun up through the air as a quick volley of bullets hit the rear of the stage, but missed everyone on it by a mile. Conrad turned to find the source as his ear was bombarded with a cacophony of panicked voices.

Able to speak above all others, DCS Chalmers burst into action. Conrad saw her leave the front of the stage and begin running down the opposite side to him. “Where are they shooting from, someone speak to me?”

Amid the short attack a void had formed near the front of the confused crowd. As splinters of wood fell upon them, they pulled back, forcing their bodies together and bouncing off each other like human-sized pinballs. Up on stage it had become a frantic race to leave the raised

platform, although it was now clear exactly who the unknown men at the rear were. Two of them grabbed the Mayor and were in the process of moving him out of harm's way. His bodyguards had acted without delay.

"This doesn't make sense," Conrad said out loud. While the attention swiftly moved to the building opposite the New City Hall, his became split between that and the stage. The threat appeared to be coming from a sniper somewhere nearby; except one that either would miss a bus from a foot away, or one who had deliberately missed.

It was a decoy, he realised. The real threat had yet to arrive.

DCS Chalmers, and a wave of other officers, pushed through the crowd as Conrad stood eyeballing them in disbelief. They were heading further away from him. She carried on in the direction of the unknown shooter, her hand in her ear and listening in on the team searching the area.

"What's happening up there," she said.

The reply was simple, "There's nobody here, Ma'am."

"What? Then who's shooting?"

That was it for Conrad. There were no signs of anyone in the building. He knew it had been for show, possibly a weapon set to fire automatically for the shooter to get away. With the Mayor halfway up the steps of his New City Hall, it now appeared to be under control. Yet something had Conrad worried still. He took the path around the edge of the stage while his radio continued to shout out. All of the chaotic chatter had kept the one person with the answers from getting through. Now he could only watch as it quickly unfolded.

Another order came through to the hidden operatives. "Team four, the target is heading your way. You're up. Go, now."

Who were they targeting? Conrad's mind flashed through a mental list of the people there. Without anything

to go on, he eventually fell upon only one possibility; Mayor Crawley. They were not trying to shoot anyone, they were there to grab the Mayor. The killer-cult wanted him.

Conrad took the steps behind the stage as quickly as his feet could carry him, all while the noise behind increased to an almost hysterical barrage. He could see the Mayor ahead, being roughly ushered inside the New City Hall building by his own security detail. No-one could be trusted at that moment, not even them. Knowing the killer-cult had a plan in motion meant one of them could possibly have been compromised too. He was seeing no option but to intervene.

Once through the spinning doors, the Mayor disappeared from site around a sharp corner that took him away from the open lobby further ahead. Conrad followed, desperate to see something that told him he was wrong about it all. The voices in his ear screamed at each other in a succession of loud exchanges. Even the DCS could not be heard through it any longer. The day had taken a turn for the worse and Conrad had been swept up in the madness. He pocketed his earpiece to relieve himself of the distraction.

"What are you doing?" someone said.

Conrad took the corner to find the Mayor standing next to both of his security guards lying still on the floor. Ahead of him stood a single gunman, his face covered by a laughing clown's face and aiming his rifle directly at Mayor Crawley. He was almost right, Conrad realised; there was more to the plot, except neither of the guards had been involved.

"Stop right there," Conrad called to the gunman. He had his hand ready on his Taser pistol, but yet to pull it. Sudden moves could escalate matters in seconds.

"Who the fuck are you, old man?" the masked man said.

Mayor Crawley spun around and faced Conrad, sending him a desperate plea in the form of two raised eyebrows.

"DCI Conrad Robinson. Drop the weapon and let the Mayor go. You can't go anywhere."

"Wrong, *Conrad*." The masked man nodded, his order unspoken yet effective.

*Shit, didn't watch you're six, old man*, Conrad thought as someone forced a sack over his head. He struggled to remove it, could feel himself begin to bite the material. It was no good, he had been outmatched in both strength and agility by his adversaries.

Mayor Crawley called out as the same was done to him. Within seconds both he and Conrad's screams were reduced to nothing more than muffled noises as they were dragged away.

Conrad could hear his kidnappers talking as he fought against them.

"What are we doing?" one of them said.

"We're taking them both."

"But he only wants the Mayor," another chimed in with.

"It doesn't matter. We can use him too."

*Use me for what?* Conrad had to guess. His blacked-out world continued despite his best efforts to stop it. He kicked out in a panic, only to find himself losing his balance instead. All he did with each attempt was cause himself pain. The more he lost his balance, the more the pressure applied to his throat increased during the struggle.

With his device still eavesdropping, Conrad could hear the unknown man's voice speaking to his people again. "Team four, come in. Do you have him?" the man in charge said.

One of the men replied, his voice repeated by Conrad's wrist device a moment later. "We have him, sir. Leaving now."

He could only imagine what terrors awaited, where these psychopaths were taking them. At least the Mayor was not to be alone.



# Chapter 16

## Cruellest intentions

*3pm, Friday: 9 hours until Switchover*

**P**hoenix awoke to a high-pitched squeal from somewhere in the room with her. As she slowly opened her eyes, she was careful not to look directly into the large, round light shining down upon her. The heat coming off of it meant it hung only a few feet away. It was certainly not that way to help her see, but for someone else. So far that person, the one who had now become her number one enemy, had not shown himself. The noises nearby suggested that was soon to change.

Realising she had been moved and was no longer lying in a heap on the floor where she had fallen would have been a good thing, if not for the fact that she had no idea where she now was. Looking past the light, she could see the same ceiling panels as before. It was part of Anthony's building still. That was good, or at least a start. As for everything else around, she struggled to make it out through the bright, halo-like glare of the lamp.

Wherever she was, she knew it was not safe.

Still the odd sound continued somewhere nearby. It had not moved any closer. Yet its constant tone filled her with dread. To locate the source, she tried to turn her head to the right. She could not move it far, something held it in place. While the numbness hung around like a bad



migraine, she fought to feel what prevented her movement. Something was attached. Pushing her head up from the hard surface beneath her proved equally as tough. It had to be a strap of some kind holding her down.

"Hello," she called out while her muddled mind obsessed over the sound. Something about it had her desperate to see.

Enough was enough. Pulling her arms up, she went to remove the strap. Again she felt resistance. She was horrified to see them lift barely an inch off the surface before they too were stopped. In the bottom of her vision, she could just about see the brown leather cuffs around her arms – the type that prevented a troubled individual from hurting themselves. The same were around her ankles. She was locked in place, attached to what she worked out to be a metal medical bed.

It was now time to panic.

"Shit, shit, shit." She tried one last time to test her restraints. They were not budging. *What do I do, what the hell do I do?*

She angled her head toward the shrill sound – what had come to resemble the whirl of a tiny little motor. This time she could feel the strap as her head slid against the leather. The sedative had begun to wear off. With the room standing on its side, she tried her best to see across the room. Sweat soon blurred her vision.

Beside her were more beds, of which one appeared very much in use. She could not see much, but what she could was unmistakable – and terrifying. A man with his back to her, worked away on something lying on the furthest table. His back arched as he concentrated hard. Something in his hand appeared to be making the high-pitched noise. It sounded like it was under stress too, as each time he leaned in, it intensified. A puff of smoke escaped across his shoulder after the last.

Her eyes slowly progressed down the length of the table. When she saw legs at the end, lying flat in front of the man, she stopped instantly in horror. The table rocked, flicking the unknown patient's feet to the side.

She did not say a word or allow herself to react in any way. *This isn't happening, it can't be*, she thought as her mind turned to finding a way out without alerting the man to her awake state. Calling out a moment ago had put her at huge risk. She would not make that mistake again. Luckily it appeared the noise of the man's work had covered her for now. He was so engrossed he had failed to notice her moving about. She hoped to keep it that way for as long as possible while she tested the strength of her cuffs.

The whining sound soon began to wind down, then it stopped entirely. When the man stepped away from the table his work was there for her to see. The two holes in his patient's temple would have caused a tremendous amount of pain if he had been awake. But where was the blood? The body was not bleeding from the holes. The man had been performing a grotesque operation on a dead person. She could think of no reason why someone would operate on the already deceased; practice maybe?

The strap around her head still refused to let her see everything. She had to force her eyes to the side just to see the body. They ached and needed a rest. After blinking away the strain, she tried again and this time succeeded in seeing more. She was horrified by the sight of a small drill resting beside the body. The man had been using it to cut into his deceased patient's skull. The sound was now unmistakable. She could not believe she had been unable to place it before. The holes in the body's temple were made by a drill!

Slowly she thought her situation through in silence, trying desperately to keep her breathing steady and quiet as well. She had seen this before, or the end result at least.

It was easy to work out what the building had been used for. This was not just the place Luke had been held prior to his escape, it was where his upload to Jack's body had occurred too. She watched the same procedure. But why do it on someone already dead? She knew, from what she had seen of the human trapped behind the Sentient consciousness, that both should still be alive. It appeared a similar process then, but there were differences that confused her.

Her mind was becoming much clearer now, which only made her fear for her life even more. Sweat ran down her forehead and traced the edge of her right ear. It was dripping away each time she flicked her head to the side to see more. If she could only move a little bit, even just one arm, she was convinced she could work herself free. Unfortunately, the person who had tied her down to the table had done so far too well. The other straps were not coming loose anytime soon. She was trapped and forced to watch another person's body being mutilated and cut into by a madman, all with a tool usually reserved for DIY.

He returned with a new drill-bit in hand, which he replaced with all the speed and accuracy to his blood stained hands as that of a drunk. The rest of him resided outside the beam of light above the table. He tested the instrument while holding it up for inspection. The drill then came to life with a rusty, grinding sound as it worked against a small amount of debris. Considering its unintended job she had a disturbing thought; the debris had to consist of bone fragments and skin, as well as the congealed blood from the already deceased patient.

Once happy, he went straight back to his work. He still had another two holes and two larger cut-outs to get through before installing one of the small black boxes. The drill sounded almost wet as the man began to push against it for better traction.

*There has to be a way out of here,* Phoenix thought.

Getting out before the man finished the operation, or installation, whatever it actually was, had become her only concern. With only the head-strap holding the top half of her body down, she had an idea. If she could slide her head down and to the side just far enough, she would be able to free herself to then sit up. The head restraint was not wrapped all the way around her head thankfully. It went over and around the bottom of the table. This was a weak point that only someone thinking clearly would ever have spotted. It told her something at least; the patients were normally sedated throughout the procedure.

So why had she woken up early?

The more she bent her neck, the more she could feel a loosening of the strap around her forehead. It was working, and only a severe neck pain resulted after each attempt. Another couple of pushes and she was certain she would be able to slip her head out.

This time the drilling did not last as long. So when the man stood up straight and switched off the drill, she froze in place. For the time being she was stuck staring directly in his direction. Every time he stepped away from the body, she was granted another devastatingly clear glimpse of his handy-work. Another of the holes had been completed, there remained only one more. She was running out of time.

"I'm ssorry if that hurt," the man suddenly said, with a noticeable slur.

Was he talking to the body? Or her?

"Now if you could jusst try and sstay sstill for me." He sounded as though he had a severe speech impediment. Not his only problem either, as he seemed to wait for a reply from his cadaver. He had to be crazy too.

Another slight movement in her head strap had almost released her enough now. To assist, she pulled against her arm and leg cuffs, pulling her a tiny bit further down the bed. Then she felt it come free. Seconds later she sat up

and leaned on her elbows. Her small success only lasted a short while though; dashed the instant she realised there was absolutely nowhere for her to go from there. Both arms were unable to move further than an inch in any direction, the same went for her legs too. She needed something more to reach the cuffs and undo them.

Her attention turned to her feet. She was still wearing shoes. There was a possibility that by removing them she could allow each foot to simply shake the cuffs loose. This was now her plan and as long as the driller man continued his disgusting work, she would try. She was not about to become another human trapped inside their own body.

Working her right shoe off of her foot, she accidentally let it drop to the ground with a slap. It was loud enough to disturb the man from his last hole. He leaned his head to the side, then switched off the drill and waited. Could he see her? Even within a fully lit room, he did not appear to have and instead bent down once more and continued.

Relief swept over her like a drug hit. Feeling it so suddenly had left her aching for more. To try and find it again, she slowly pulled her foot up and soon felt her sock pulling away. The strap was sliding against the material, which began to bunch up around her ankle. Again, with enough working the strap back and forth, she felt sure she could get it loose. If that failed to work, she had nothing else to try, she would be trapped and left waiting for her turn.

She pulled again. The cuff moved down a little further. Yet again, the same. It had a chance of working.

"Ah, there we go," the man said as something cracked. He had broken through with the drill for the fourth time. Next were the cut-outs, which required a much more disturbing looking drill bit, one more suited to routing. It was thicker and much more threatening looking. The man swapped them over with a cold casualness, despite his shaky hands and loose grip.

Still he had not seen her. By now Phoenix was certain he could not see too well out of his left eye. That and his speech problems suggested to her that he had sustained an injury at some point. In the darkness she still could not see enough to confirm it. But it gave her a small boost of hope that she could escape before he noticed.

This was now the final chance to free herself. Except with the last tug she managed to roll her sock over itself, creating a woollen barrier for the cuff to become stuck behind. It was no good, she had made it worse. In frustration she yanked at her foot again. There was no movement at all, only an unfortunate creaking noises from the bed.

*Oh, for fuck's sake, come on, come on!*

Terror stricken and becoming desperate, she had no choice but to try again. The operation was about to end and her time to get out had almost run out. Still there was nothing, no loosening at all, just more noise. In fact lots of it, as a chain beneath the bed tapped against the metal leg. She became rigid while the sound called out to the driller man still drilling away. It continued for a second or two longer, like a ticking from a metronome, even though she did not move again.

He heard something this time. When he turned and switched off the drill, he stayed there for longer, listening out for more. He was not happy to carry on after this last disturbance. This was it, she had made too much of a nuisance of herself. With the drill in hand, he searched around himself with exaggerated swoops of his head from side to side.

Then he faced her.

"Fuck," she said under her breath, as his face ventured into the light for the first time. *Jesus!*

It was almost all there. His left eye hung an inch or two lower than his right, with big puffy bulges where the blood had become trapped behind the hanging skin. He definitely

could not see through that. It appeared to be unattached to anything within the cavernous hole just above the eye. From the looks of his contorted lump of a face, he had been shot through the back of the head. The bullet and resulting shrapnel had taken a large fist-sized chunk out of the left side of his forehead, leaving a gaping crevice where a large part of his brain once lived.

The further he looked, the more his crooked lips leaned at an angle, a small dribble of drool escaping as he tried to breathe. His nose looked to be of little use, it was filled with thick and solid lumps of blood. His only good eye focused on her sitting up and staring back in fear.

A chill brushed past like someone invisible had unexpectedly entered the room. She could feel her body begin to react on her behalf, shivering as death began to hobble in her direction like a demonic surgeon, all while still holding a blood soaked implement of pain and torture, which gnashed at the air each time its button was pressed in error. The man had a noticeable lack of control over the right side of his body. He was dragging his leg and allowing his arm to swing as he moved.

He reached the next nearest bed, its light shining off of the small black box stuck to his head. It remained attached still to the raised part of his left side. The bullet had missed it somehow. She could see the burn marks on his skin where the gunshot had exited his forehead. Whatever was left inside the man's skull had been broken and torn, separated into pieces that continued to work afterwards thanks to the consciousness lurking inside the box. The human had to be dead.

"Please, you don't have to do this," she said, yanking at the cuffs with all the strength she could muster. Her growing despair had made her into a shaking wreck of a person.

"I must have miscalculated your dosage. You should not be awake." The man waved the drill at her with a look of

disappointment to only one side of his face. His right side did not react at all, the lobe of his brain assigned control of it had said an unexpected farewell in the muzzle flash of a projectile weapon.

"Don't, please... fuck, I'm begging you."

"Subjects should not be conscious," he struggled to say, with his tongue stuck between his teeth, "they cannot be awake while I work. Please lie back down and wait your turn."

When he reached her, it was the smell that first hit her before anything her vision had to deal with. He smelt rotten, just like the ground floor tomb she explored earlier. He had at least put the drill on the table next to her. He did not want to operate on her just yet it appeared.

"Just let me go, please," she said as the man began pushing her back onto the bed. With her arms and legs still tied up, she had no strength to fight back with. One small shove and she was right where she started. Only now the man knew she was awake. He leaned over her and forced her head back under the strap, then tightened it firmly into place. It dug into her forehead, squeezing her eyebrows against her skull.

She had to close her eyes and hold her mouth shut tight when a stringy drop of drool landed on her face. There was nothing more she could do, his face hovered a few inches above her in full view of the hot lamp. In the new light she looked up, her eyes half open, and could see directly inside his head to where an empty hole revealed the missing brain mass.

"You are much more responsive than my other patient. I fear he may not survive the procedure," the man said. With his arms either side of her head, he looked over her face, studying her features with his one good eye - the other involuntarily glanced across the room. "You may be a better candidate anyway."

"I'm not, it won't work on me, please."



"No, no, no. I think I should try at least. You may be surprised at just how good I am at this. My last few were highly successful. Oh the master will be pleased with my work this time." His demented smile lifted one side of his mouth to form a long slant.

"Oh Christ, oh shit, shit, shit," she said, her eyes darting around the room in desperation.

The man then began his preparations while she stared at the ceiling. Her struggling was for nothing now, as each attempt only tightened the straps. The ones around her feet were scraping at her ankles and threatening to break the skin.

When she saw the drill pass over her face she could not help it, she had to fight with whatever she had left inside. So, as the drill began to spin, she closed her eyes and forced her body up against the restraints. If what was coming was even half as traumatic as she had heard from Jack – the human behind Luke's personality – then she wanted to see none of it. Feeling it would be bad enough.

The sound approached slowly as a target patch of skin was chosen. Her body was now shaking as much as the man's had been while working on his other patient. She moved over in the bed as much as she could, but her head was unable to come along for the ride. The straps were far too tight to allow this now.

"No, please," she said with a whimper. This was it for her, she knew. One inch more and the drill would make light work of boring into the side of her head. The closer it got, the louder it became, until the noise was running right through her skull and rattling her grey matter inside. She desperately did not want to be like Jack, trapped inside her own body while an enemy consciousness took over. Now it seemed she had no choice in the matter. It was about to happen whatever.

"You must hold still as I work, otherwise this could be a little messy," the man said. "Humans are so very fragile,

don't you agree. Now, here we go."

"Don't do this, for the love of God, please don't."

"One... two... three..."

But nothing happened.

Her eyes were closed so tight she could feel the muscles beginning to weaken from the strain. She refused to open them while the drill continued to bark at the side of her head, even though she knew something had changed. The man should have begun already.

"Step away from her, right now," someone else said. She recognised the voice immediately; it was Rhys. He had come for her.

"You cannot be here," was the man's reply.

The sight of him standing next to the driller man, his eyes welling up the moment he saw her staring back at him in fear, was one she had no clue how to deal with. She had been sure it had all come to an end for her, one last whimper before giving in. Of course she would be grateful, but for the time being only an explosive feeling of shock and confusion swept through her. How was he there?

"Let me out of this, please, let me out," she ordered of her rescuer.

"Sure, don't worry, I've got it."

The driller man still went on. "This is wrong. You cannot leave this place, you are not ready."

"Save it buddy," Rhys said, nudging the man with his Taser pistol. "Move away so I can free my friend. I swear to God, if you don't, I'll remove the rest of your sorry looking face, understand? And leave the drill there."

A loud *clank* sound by the side of her head was a relief to hear. The tool had been knocked to the floor as the man backed away. Rhys then released her right hand and moved on to the left. The second both had been removed, she snapped up into a sitting position and grabbed him for a tight and thankful embrace. They held each other while the gun aimed directly at the driller man.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" Phoenix asked.

"I've been monitoring you since you left my place. You really need to let people help you, Phoenix. I know you're strong enough, but you don't have to be. Not all the time," Rhys said, his chin bashing against her shoulder with each word.

She tried her best not to cry, with only a couple of tears having made it out in the end. When she spoke, it was with a stutter as the emotions fought each other for freedom. "I know. It's just hard to trust people."

"You can trust me. You know that, right?" Rhys placed a hand on the back of her head and stroked her spiky hair with his thumb. When the driller man went to move, he held his gun up again. "Stay the fuck there, man, I'm warning you."

"What do we do with him?" she asked.

Rhys laughed. "No idea. Does he know anything?"

The embrace ended as Phoenix thought over their options. They had someone who had to know more about what was going on. Unfortunately, he looked barely able to answer their questions. They separated and looked at the driller man standing, cowering in the corner. The situation had calmed much quicker than it had escalated. The man was as unsure as the two of them. He gave up without a fight.

Phoenix looked down at her leg restraints and was about to ask for them to be removed, when she caught another shadow in the doorway. Before she could ask who, the man raced forward.

"Rhys, watch out!" she screamed.

It was not soon enough. The unknown - white haired - figure sent Rhys to the floor after swinging a metal tray into the side of his head. He fell away instantly.

"You must remember to sedate them all before starting," the other man said, his voice dry sounding and underpowered. When he stepped into the light, she saw

why; his throat had been cut and roughly bandaged up. A line of red seeped through the soft material.

She went for the man as soon as he got close enough. In a flash, her anger and desperation returned, after hope had been so ruthlessly ripped from her grasp. Her saviour was now nothing but an unconscious lump upon the cold ground, one getting in the way of the operation. She grabbed at the man's clothing, slapped his face and body, even scratched at his skin like a hysterical street cat. Nothing stopped him, he was much more forceful than the other.

There was a single hole in the centre of his forehead. He had not been shot from behind, like the other, but from the front. Someone had done a poor job at silencing these two.

With a ferocious last swing, she caught the black box on the side of the man's head. He flinched in reaction, then shook it off. In reply he caught her across the face with the back of his hand. Her struggle had been overpowered. The man held her wrists in place, locking her arms and preventing another attack.

While doing her best to fight back, she had forgotten to watch the driller man behind her. Between the two of them, they had her trapped again. This time he would make sure her dosage was high enough to keep her quiet for longer too. So when he jabbed her again with a sharp needle, she knew it was for the last time. The operation would proceed while she slept.

The same was probably true for Rhys too. It had all gone so wrong, so fast. What awaited her was worse than death, in her opinion. From the shadow of another's consciousness she would be forced to watch as it carried out whatever terrible task it had been given. All with her hands, her arms and legs. The blood would stain *her* skin.

As if to seal her fate, she heard the drill wind up again. She left the room behind in the same way she had entered it; with a horrendous soundtrack of homemade brain

surgery tools playing close by. Except this time it was much, much closer.

\* \* \*

The time Graham had spent in the company of the Sentients had been mostly quiet and uneventful, allowing him to lose himself to his thoughts. A few strange sounds had brought him right back to reality though. A good majority of these were the moans of Stephen and Kindness' patients. They had worked tirelessly to aid them. It was a strong show of togetherness and compassion from each, one Graham hoped Kindness had noticed. He just needed something to show this about himself and humanity as well, anything to change the Sentients' opinion.

Alex came bounding over from around the other side of the long, circular structure like she crested an impossibly steep hill. She skipped along without any sign of concern or worry. She kept herself occupied with an extended playtime. Seeing the imitation of his daughter prancing around as if none of it confused her as it did him, reminded him of just how out of place he was. However familiar parts of it felt to him, it was always let down by the huge amount that did not. She had been all that grounded him during the long wait. Without her reappearing every few minutes, he would have quickly lost himself.

This time she stopped by and decided to chat.

"When are we leaving?" she asked.

"No idea, Alex. Stephen's still helping out. We could be here for a while longer."

"Oh, OK," she replied before turning and skipping off again. Her bouncing movement made springs out of her voluminous hair, which snapped back at the peak of each skip.

Graham watched her leave and felt himself tense up again. Being surrounded by strangers he could barely even recognise as alive at times, made him nervous. Kindness' reaction to him earlier had been one others had mimicked since. A few had gone as far as warning him off with another barrage of sound – their chosen protective barrier it appeared. He gave up shortly after trying to engage with a couple of them. All he could do was watch and wait.

He had lost sight of Stephen over an hour ago. So when he saw his friend wandering in his direction again, he was relieved and thankful to see a smile on his face. He had to have learnt something new.

At a close enough distance, Stephen pulled him aside and began to speak quietly.

"I believe I've made a few friends here already," he said, looking around them.

"Good," Graham replied, not really seeing the relevance.

"Yes, they've begun to answer my questions. I have a fairly good idea where Luke may have gone from here. I've been hearing mention of something called the Conduit."

"The Conduit, what's that?"

Stephen stepped closer and lowered his voice even further. "The way out."

"Really? Where is it?"

"That, unfortunately, isn't something I've found out just yet. It sounds like a small group of Sentients left here with Luke just before this place was attacked again, but they never returned. Either they were killed or they all got out. This Conduit thing is obviously behind the disappearances of Isaac's forces."

"Then we have to find it. I think it's time we spoke to Kindness again," Graham said, leading the way.

After a short wade through the makeshift infirmary, they found him surrounded by a group of five other Sentients. The intimate nature of their meeting suggested an interruption was the least appropriate action for an

outsider to take. But Graham did not particularly care, considering they appeared to hate him already. To make absolutely sure they heard him, he spoke loudly and with an overabundance of confidence.

"I need to speak to Kindness," he said, looking directly at the nearest blank face. They all lacked detail, so he could only guess which one was Kindness. He expected to find out soon, and with another ear-piercing shriek.

He was not let down either. A torrent of sound blasted through his head. It took his breath away. Then one bold voice began to break out of the chaos.

"What do you want, *Human*?" the Sentient to his right said.

"I have one question and then I'll leave. That is what you want after all isn't it, for me to leave you alone?"

This time the Sentient opposite him spoke up. "I have already refused you our help, Graham Denehey. You should go back to your world." It was Kindness this time.

"That's the problem, I can't. But if you tell me about the Conduit, then I'll go away."

The group all turned inward and discussed their options without speaking a word. He could tell they did not all agree, a few even went as far as leaving the group entirely and walking away to make that as clear as possible to him. It was at least a good sign for Graham's threesome that they took any time at all to consider it.

"We agree to tell you, Graham Denehey," one of them finally said.

"Great. First I need to know where it is, then I want to know if Luke left here to find it."

"You will die if you go to the Conduit, it is not safe for any being," another of the Sentients said.

Kindness raised his hand to silence his friend before continuing himself. "The Conduit will be the last thing you see, if you go. It is in the heart of the enemy's territory, in the centre of the Sentient world. Our spies have seen it only

once. They were then wiped out by only one of Isaac's patrols. That was the last we saw of the one you call Luke; he led the insurgency."

"There is no need to look for him, he is surely dead." The Sentient on the right finished off the warning not to go.

"You don't know that," Graham protested with a shake of his head. "He might have made it out."

"Out? Out where?" yet another of the surrounding Sentients said, its voice much softer than the rest.

"Into my world. Stephen suspects that is what the Conduit must be for. If it is, then I'm going to find it and return to my home through it."

This caused a prolonged hush to spread across the group. Graham's human mind just could not break through their telepathic firewall for now. He was to wait while they decided his fate once more.

Before they finished, another Sentient joined them. All of the attention quickly shifted to this new member, who had brought news of some kind.

"What's going on?" Graham had to ask as the others reacted to the announcement he had missed.

"I'm afraid our time together is at an end," Kindness said. He walked away, followed closely behind by the others in his group. It was clear Kindness had many ears for his people and kept each open to anything important. Though for now they were all closed to Graham and his companions.

"Stephen," Graham said, turning to face his friend in confusion. "Any idea what that guy just said to them?"

"Indeed I do, and it isn't good news."

"Did I upset them again?"

"Not this time, Graham. It was news of an incoming attack. It appears our presence may have alerted Isaac's patrols. There are three on the way."

"What!" Graham said, suddenly and frantically worried about the imitation Alex's location. Her not being beside



him was like a missing leg, leaving him feeling off balance. "Three of those creature things? What do we do?"

For a moment Stephen looked about them, while the rest of the able-bodied Sentients became highly animated. The news had spread far quicker than speech alone; another benefit of telepathy. He eventually answered, although his reply was one Graham had already predicted.

"We must fight alongside them," Stephen said, his face tight and losing colour fast.

Hearing him say it out loud still filled Graham with instant dread. They expected them to fight? With what, their fists?

# Chapter 17

## Resistance is worthwhile

**I**t was time for another lesson, although one Graham would have to learn fast to avoid an indeterminably brutal fate. This time it would happen in the heat of the moment, where much stronger beings than him had already failed. The last attack had previously left a trail of injured or dead Sentients.

A result that was very likely to be repeated.

"We should stay further back," Stephen said. He found a clear area just to their left.

Graham followed, his focus remaining fixed on the entrance they had used earlier. "I don't understand how those creatures can get in here, we almost didn't. And why aren't we all watching the door?"

"You are still seeing this place as a human does, Graham. An entrance and an exit are what you expect to see, but they aren't always as simple as a door and a staircase for a Sentient. To get inside this place the enemy only has to overwhelm the stored energy of the Sentients inside, like breaking through a force-field. Once a weakness is found, it is exploited until it breaks. They cannot allow even *one* of them in here, otherwise we will all be destroyed."

"How can *I* fight these things? I still can't make sense of this place like you and Alex can?" Graham said with a nervous sigh.

"Then change what you see."

The suggestion had Graham at odds with himself. His first few lessons with Stephen had taught him how to manipulate objects in their surroundings, but this was another step too far. He found it hard enough to accept the loose rules of gravity, now he was supposed to alter the very world around him?

“Change it how?” he asked.

“If it will help you understand this place, then make it your own. Remember how I showed you to move that floating block earlier? Whatever you used to find the strength to interact with that, you must find again. Only this time get rid of what you don’t understand and put in what you do. It’s what I did when I created my version of Sanctuary.”

An alarm sounded out behind them, breaking Graham’s concentration instantly. The Sentients then began to move forward, forming a line of resistance. With the strangeness of the room’s geometry came a distorted and confused orientation. To him it all appeared to be a continuous shape with no sign of which way was forward and which was back. Yet the others around him were sure. They had their sights set on the area just beyond their line of glowing bodies. This was where the attack was coming from. They sensed it somehow – and it was nowhere near the door Graham could still see.

Alex suddenly appeared from behind a group of Sentients, all huddled together to the side. She looked unhappy about the unexpected disruption and made it plainly clear with her arms crossed and her expression filled with gloom.

“This absolutely sucks!” she said.

“Language, Alex.” Graham had to stop himself right there, his daughter would never have said such a thing. The Sentient pretending to be her had let the imitation slip. Tension had created a strange cloud of unease over those inside this hidden realm.

"Graham, stay here with Alex. I must speak with Kindness before it begins."

"Right now?"

"Yes. I think it would be best if we kept you as far back as possible. This attack could be the one that makes it through. The others have failed only because of the large number of Sentients still able to withstand them. That is not the case this time. I've seen far too many unable to fight."

Stephen left them behind and went off in search of the Sentient leader. Graham and Alex stood hand in hand and watching the others prepare for the enemy's attempt at breaching the walls. He decided to assess for himself just how many had been put out of action by the repeated onslaught. It only took him a short while to agree; there were far more lying about the place than were standing ready to defend themselves. The numbers added up to a less than effective fighting force.

As much to comfort himself as Alex, he squeezed her hand in his. "We'll get through this, honey. Don't you worry, Daddy won't let anything happen," he said.

"I know, Graham."

He wished, just this once, that she had called him Daddy in reply, despite his earlier insistence to the contrary. In truth, he had no idea how to keep her safe. He soon began to regret leaving the safety of Sanctuary behind. This was no better. To know what happened to Luke and how to return to the human world would cost him dearly now.

*Even being trapped inside the damn puzzle maze was better than this,* he thought, shortly before spotting something strange.

His first indication that the battle had begun came in the form of a glowing emanation from the area just beyond the line of Sentients. It came out of nowhere and hovered in place like a ball of plasma; a miniature star forming from nothingness. As it grew, it let out an explosive booming sound that flashed past the line like a supersonic solar

wind. The sudden burst of energy whipped at the clothing hanging around Graham's body.

From outside, the enemy had started its heavy bombardment of the Sentients' hiding place. Their entry point was to be a small, fiery ball of matter that burned brighter as it forced a hole inside.

"Shit, I can't fight that. We can't fight it like this," Graham said as a nearby Sentient joined the line ahead of him.

To prevent the attackers from making it in, the Sentient line surrounded the tiny star and held out their long arms. From the tips of their fingers erupted a steady stream of light that sputtered sparks upon contact with the glowing ball. The light was somehow pushing against the shape, like it wanted to squeeze it out of existence altogether. Each Sentient began to do the same as the shape slowly shrank, and moved in closer to keep the pressure up. The effort required to do so was immense, but they continued without any sign of giving in.

It still had Graham figuratively scratching his head to understand what he saw. He knew Stephen was right, as always, and that he needed another way to see it all. Achieving it was not going to be easy, considering he had barely a clue where to start. If the place was just flat and not falling away at the edges like he stood on the outside of a tube, he would know where to aim his attention.

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Alex said beside him, to his surprise. Had she been listening in on his thoughts all along?

"You can stop doing that right away, young lady," he replied, looking down at her with a smile.

"Sorry. You should start with that though. I think this place would look much better on a flat surface. Can I help you change it?"

"Sure." In fact he was more than happy.

As soon as the first glowing shape had been squashed to death, another formed a few feet away. The attack was relentless. The moment more than one appeared the Sentient forces would be stretched beyond their capability. They were already struggling with it all. To deal with the intrusion, even those nursing the injured had now joined the fight.

Graham was becoming fearful while he watched helplessly and still totally at a loss. His focus could not move beyond the glowing shapes and what they represented. Imagining the violence that lay just behind it scared him deeply. The creature he had seen had not even attacked, yet it still had him fearing for his life. How was he going to defend himself and Alex against such a thing?

"Graham, you have to concentrate for this to work," Alex said.

He turned away from the noise and the glow. It was not going to get any better by just staring at it, he knew. It still did not stop him wanting to keep his eye on it.

"Right, OK. What do I do then?"

"Close your eyes," she said, as she did it first. "Now, picture what you remember of this place. Can you see it?"

With his eyes clamped shut, he could see something for sure. Only it was not the room, but the glowing shape again.

"No, not that," Alex snapped at him. "Forget that stupid thing for a minute. Just think of this room and how it would look flat."

He tried his best to do so. Still it refused to change, even within his own mind. At the sound of another glowing orb tearing through the ether, he cracked open his left eye and shot a look across to it. It had happened just like he expected. The Sentients were now too thinly spread out. It would only require one more orb to overwhelm them completely. Either he, Alex and Stephen had to find an escape, or they would soon find themselves face to face with the enemy.

The sonic booms were now pushing against his body as they raced past. Only three creatures were outside and yet they were causing chaos inside. A few of the fighting Sentients had already succumbed to what Graham suspected was some form of exhaustion. They were not going to hold out for much longer.

With his eyes closed again he concentrated hard on flattening out his memory of the place, using the Sentient front line as the cut-off point. They would be the front and he and Alex would then find themselves roughly in the middle. So like rolling out a matt upon the floor, he kicked it with the heel of his imaginary foot until all of the bumps had gone. Then he opened his eyes again.

"You're kidding! I did that?" he said, pleased and astounded by his work.

Beside him Alex jumped excitedly on the spot. He really had done it, the room was as flat as any other he ever knew. No more gravity defying structures for him. But his pride did not last long as he saw exactly how far the injured stretched. They went all the way to the end of his newly flat world. If just a third of them were still able to fight they would be more than a match for the enemy. The cost of their fight was plain to see; they could take little more.

"You did it, Graham."

"That was... easy," he replied, a look over to the glowing spheres as he spoke. *What could I try next?* he thought.

"What else can you change?" Alex asked. She evidently had the same thought, but her sights were set much lower than Graham's. "What about the walls, can you make them look different too?"

There was something else entirely Graham wanted to try. Something had clicked into place finally. The first time he succeeded in altering his surroundings he had felt awash with energy, like he tapped a new source of power within himself. But as with any new skill, he needed more practice. Except he was not interested in taking it slowly now, he

found the process satisfyingly easy after he put his mind to it. There was no point in wasting it on the décor of the room. He wanted to do something about the intruding enemy instead.

He stepped forward, to one of the glowing fireballs. The heat coming off of it made his skin tingle. He expected it would set him alight if he touched it, or vaporise his body in a flash. It did not matter to him as he approached. There was nothing to his plan, just a gut feeling. Something was coming through and he had to stop it. While the Sentients next to him stared disbelievingly at the idiot human about to get himself killed, he held out his hand and repeated the same process as before.

The room was somehow wrong. It lacked a human's more logical touch, he decided. First of which was some kind of a lock on the door.

"Wait, Graham, stop," Stephen said, racing over to them.

Alex soon stopped him in his tracks.

"Graham and I are certain we can help. You must let him try," she said, not sounding at all like a child anymore.

Hearing this gave Graham even more confidence that what he was about to try could succeed. For some strange reason it all felt exactly as he wanted it to. If Alex was helping, then how much of what he was doing was down to him was anyone's guess. In that moment he hardly cared. His inner strength flowed freely now, after the room had opened out for him. No-one could stop it.

Nothing appeared to change at first, despite what he felt. Around him the others had continued to shoot their light straight into the fire to keep it at bay. The fight was not going in their favour and slowly the shape was still growing. The same went for the other group, which had now lost two of its members. Was he just getting in their way? He, at least, felt that was not the case.

"What are you doing, Human?" One of the Sentients next to him said.



He ignored it and focused harder on the bright shape in front of him. Why was nothing happening? He was sure he could do something after his success in reshaping the room. Trying again, he closed his eyes and set a new plan in motion. If he could not stop the enemy getting in, then maybe he could change what they entered into.

Floating just a foot or two away, the shape let out another loud boom that forced him back. It felt much stronger than the others. He became sure that it had been in reaction to the Sentients' weakening fight. It had to be a sign of their impending danger. This was proven only a second later when the orb exploded outward to the size of a two metre high doorway, the flash blinding him for a split second.

The enemy had broken through before he had the chance to try anything.

All of the Sentients nearest to him fell to the ground and stayed there for a moment as the outside world streamed in. Graham held his place, watching in horror as one of the creatures approached the hole. Once inside it would tear them all limb from limb. Thankfully the Sentients had not given up yet. A small group burst out through the gap and launched into one of the swirling death clouds in a desperate attempt to hold it back.

It was not long before each were pulled apart in a seamless show of strength from only one of the enemy. The Sentients did not turn to ash like before, but appeared to simply shatter as though made from a brittle substance. They were hardly a match for it at all. Immediately after dealing with them it decided it would enter their hidden realm and finish the job once and for all.

Graham was suddenly left facing the violent and highly threatening presence of the enemy, its collection of contorting spikes and sharp limbs all glowing in the darkness. He had nowhere to go but back, step by step. Alex was behind him, penned in by his backward reaching

arms; exactly where he wanted her for now. All of the self-assuredness he felt before, all of his strength, now rolled across the dusty ground along with the remains of the Sentients killed right in front of him. All he wanted was to keep his daughter safe from the monster.

"Get away from it, Graham," Stephen called to him as the creature glided in through the gap, its powerful humming sounds shaking the floor beneath him.

He was all that stood in its way, yet it did not attack. The thing had obviously never encountered a human before, and that had it curious. It followed him with its two deep recesses in the centre, like eyes hiding in the fog. It was trying to understand him, to work him out. He did the same in return.

His enemy appeared a soulless entity in this form, a being brought forth from the deepest depths of hell. It worked for Isaac alright, and carried his disregard for human and sentient life just as strongly.

"Graham!" Stephen shouted out again.

It'd had enough of a look to gauge his uselessness, and now he was an obstacle to push past. The largest of its spikes stretched out high above it like an axe readying for a downward swing. Graham watched it reach up high above them. He began to move Alex away in anticipation of the strike.

"Go, Alex," he yelled, quickly shoving her aside and falling to his knees in readiness.

An energy burst from the side pushed against him; another of the doorways had opened. It was a hopeless fight and one Graham was about to be completely removed from. He clamped his hands over his ears and boomed out his last call of anger.

The creature attacked with all the ferocity of a starved lion. Its sharp teeth were showing proudly as it swung its spikes forward, ready to impale and dismember the

unfortunate victim. Dropping the sharp edge down toward him, it went for a swift and decisive kill.

Only what came next was not quite what he envisioned.

Something exploded high above, sending large pieces of dark rock down around him. The creature was caught by one of them and landed in a pile beneath it, the blade crushed before it had finished its swing. Where had it all come from? Had the ceiling collapsed? It continued until one last enormous crash followed, drowning out all the others. The world had imploded by the sound of the ensuing cave-in.

Graham closed his eyes and waited, not knowing which was to be his undoing, one of the other invading creatures or a loose boulder. All he was sure of was that he had been the one to cause it to happen.

Then, nothing. No death blow, no sudden pain from the top of the skull, just silence. All of the fighting, all of the terror and fear had gone. In its place was a calmness that made him just as scared as before. He kept his eyes closed tight. For all he knew death had taken him as swiftly as the creature had intended; one last gift to be thankful for. Opening them would only force him to see which.

If not for a strange noise directly in front of him, he would have stayed that way for much longer. Something nearby had begun to move, and it was close. He cracked open one eye and was at first shocked by the darkness that surrounded him. Only one small hole let in the outside light. A thin strip of red expanded out from this to bring an odd hue to the rocks layered over the top of him.

He began to worry that the creature had survived being squashed beneath the large rock. There was nothing he could do if that was the case, his back had already reached the farthest wall after he shuffled back on his arse. Whatever was coming, he would have to attack it first if he was to get out. In the middle of the front wall something was trying to break through that he could only wait to face.

It was then that he realised he held something in his tight grip, something metallic. He squinted in the dull light to see what it was. A gun? Along with these large pieces of debris, he had brought forth a weapon, and one that felt worryingly familiar to him. The sensation of its ridges and cold grip in his hand had encouraged something to come forward from the murkiest depths of his own memory.

He had held this exact gun once before.

As he looked it over, he found an irresistible urge to raise it to his temple and feel it resting against his skull. Why did it feel so right? He could imagine himself in the exact same position and pulling the trigger. Had it happened already, like the other places he had visited while trapped inside the puzzle maze? This time he had a present to compare it with. He knew he did not have to do what the voice in his head told him he needed to do. It still did not make it any easier to resist. The past wanted to play out in the same way again.

His finger slipped neatly into place, seated gently against the trigger. Closing his eyes once again, he waited to see exactly how it was to play out. The memory had started to form in his mind. He could remember something new. A call from behind him. He heard it again the moment he recalled it happening. It was a woman's voice, but she was not calling to him. She was ordering someone to hurry up while a distant thumping sound vibrated through the surrounding rocks.

The question he faced almost halted his heart from beating, as it hit him in that moment; had he pulled the trigger before? Everything else had fallen into place. This was from the day the real Sanctuary had been lost. Phoenix and Stephen were escaping while he remained trapped, his leg crushed beneath a rock. He looked about and saw the place where he had laid during that time. What followed was his last memory as a human, in a human body.

Again, the sound of something moving disturbed his re-enactment of the past. Pushed aside and sent tumbling to the floor, a handful of small rocks began to pile up by his feet. The noise was from something trying to get in to his little hiding place. For now the urge to blow his own brains out had subsided, replaced instead by a desire to see what had begun to dig through to him. As with the gun in his hand, this still felt correct. Everything was happening as he wanted it to, as if by his own design.

What eventually got in was not what he had started to suspect. It was not a Sentient come to dig him out, but a human hand. It pulled at the pile of rocks and removed one at a time. He watched in quiet as more of the rocks were removed. Slowly more light invaded and became an even deeper red. It looked to him to be some form of emergency lighting. Did the Sentients have such a thing in their realm?

He leaned in and peered through the hole. Whoever was trying to get through, they were choosing to remain silent. If it were Alex or Stephen, he would have heard them calling out to him. No-one was. The person continued to quietly dig. There was no-one left to do this at the time, he could remember that much. So who was it?

Once the gap opened out to the size of a fist, he ducked beside it and called out.

"Hello? Who's there?"

Silence.

"Alex, Stephen, are you there?"

His only answer came in the form of another hand slowly reaching in and offering an open palm to him. Whoever it was they were there to help. He could not tell if it was happening now or as part of his memory of the time. Was this person saving him from his own trap, or the chaos that followed the fall of Sanctuary?

After a second of nerves, Graham took the hand and held it tight. It was cold, much more so than he thought healthy for a human, and far more solid too. Strangely the heat

from his own hand was not heating it up either. But it did not let go. It held him with an unnatural strength as it became slippery like glass.

He chose not to struggle back. Instead he sat holding it as the coldness began to spread throughout his flesh, each cell seeming to freeze upon contact with whatever had started to course through his veins. Muscles became solid and immobilised by this one touch. The rest of him followed, until he could eventually see the resulting glassy sheen covering the outside of his body, like an icy shell had formed to protect him.

When the freezing sensation hit his lungs, he gasped for air. The last breath he could manage was forced out again as his chest solidified. This had been how it ended on that day. He knew that for sure now. Someone had stepped in before he was able to end it himself. A protector had seen to it that he stay preserved and alive. This person must have been the one to place his mind in the Sentient world too. There was only one being he knew of that could – and would even want to – do such a thing; Luke had to have done it.

He could not move while his face froze, his eyes locked in position and staring ahead. The hand had vanished and only a thin, sparkling crystal structure remained in place. It had dug through the solid rock to reach him, where it then froze in place.

His body had to be there still, somewhere near the remains of Sanctuary. Realising this caused his mind to spin. If not for the solid crystal structure surrounding his lungs, he would have cheered at the top of his voice. He knew where his body resided and was sure he could find a way to reach it. He had to get back to his Sentient friends and tell them what he now knew about his last day as a human. That and the fact he had killed an enemy in the process.

Although he expected the latter would interest them more.

Of course to do that the freezing process would have to stop first. Surely it would end before he lost consciousness? Was this re-creation so realistic that it would result in him trapped like before? He began to worry that it was.

One last attempt at a breath and then he was done. Wherever he had transported himself to within the Sentient world, he only hoped it was close enough for either Alex, Stephen or Kindness to find him. If they did not soon, he would be stuck there inside another prison, for what could be a very long time. Especially if the Sentients had lost their fight with the remaining enemies.

## Chapter 18

### Behind enemy lines

*7pm, Friday: 5 hours until Switchover*

**W**ith his chair beneath his feet and wedged up against the wall, Conrad clawed at the edge of the wooden board that blocked out the window of his prison. However much he tried he just could not get a nail in between to prise it free. He had been trying for a while, alone and waiting for his fellow prisoner to return again. Over the course of a few hours his kidnappers had taken the Mayor away repeatedly, then brought him back in a worse state than before. They were questioning him, but not Conrad.

Before he could break another nail or splinter his hand again, he stepped down from the chair and slumped into it. It was nothing more than a wooden kitchen chair, and it received his weight accordingly; with a creak and a thud. He was back exactly where he had been moments before having the urge to try the window again. So far he had had absolutely no success at all.

He stared at the door, focusing once again on the mechanical lock that kept it sealed. From the look of the place it had not been thrown together in a hurry. No, this had been in planning for a while. So much so that those responsible had found a place which suited their needs rather than having gone through the trouble of setting one



up. He had seen locks like these on doors before, in his own place of work.

*Using one of the abandoned police stations, are we?* Conrad asked the question with the full knowledge that it did not really help him. There were old and unused stations all over the city, at least three of which resided within the rough distance he had been taken. Even blindfolded he could judge such a thing. They had not walked far before boarding a Mag-Lev car, then a few minutes later they had exited it. That amounted to little more than a mile or two.

The lock of the door clanked open a moment later, spurring Conrad to his feet. As with each other time when the Mayor had been brought back, he expected to have to help. They had done a number on him the last time and handed him back with a fresh collection of bruises and cuts. When the door swung open he stood firm and opened his arms, ready to receive his prison companion.

"Ten minutes, then we start again," the masked guard said as he tossed the weakened Mayor Crawley into the room. He slammed the door shut soon after, the lock falling back into place with a hard thump behind him.

Conrad did his best to keep the Mayor upright, but only managed for a short while. "Take it easy," he said, lowering them both to the cold concrete floor. The Mayor lay on his side and curled up into a small ball, where he shuddered and shook. Shock had stolen most of his strength. "What did they do to you?"

"I couldn't answer their questions," Mayor Crawley said, his words almost blocked out by his hands. His voice seeped through the gaps in his fingers.

"What did they want to know?"

"I told them I didn't know anything, just like last time."

What had become clear the very instant they had arrived, was that their kidnappers were uninterested in killing them straight away. There appeared to be something that they wanted from them first. Something he had no

intention of giving them once he found out himself what it could be. He expected the moment they got what they wanted, he and his Mayor would find themselves facing the same grotesque mutilation as that of the other victims.

He was going to do his best to avoid that, but first he needed answers.

"Can you sit up?" he asked.

Mayor Crawley nodded and slowly obliged. Although unsteady, the white-haired figure of authority Conrad had seen on the stage earlier found the energy to support himself again. He had been put through far worse this time, it was clear from his bloodied face. His nose still wept a fresh sliver of blood down and around his mouth. But it was his hand that had sustained the most damage.

As Conrad checked his Mayor over, he spotted the snapped finger jutting out at an odd angle. "Oh shit," he said, unsure whether to try and reset it or just leave it be.

"Look on the bright side, Conrad, at least they haven't killed us yet."

The perverted smile on the Mayor's face made Conrad pause for a second. During their time together he had found it difficult to gauge the man beneath the title.

"But what are they trying to get out of us in the meantime? Didn't they mention anything?" he said.

Mayor Crawley coughed up a lump and projected it across the room to the side wall before speaking. "They've only asked what I know about them, then they've beaten me. I suspect you'll be next. Just tell them what you know."

"Do you think they've known all along that we were on to them?"

"I don't know, Conrad. This killer-cult thing has been a pain from the get go. We should have dealt with them weeks ago."

"Sir, with all due respect, if you hadn't blocked my investigation I would have."

"So this is *my* fault?"

*Of course it's all your fucking fault!* Conrad stopped short of saying. "Here, take this," he said instead, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and offering it over.

Mayor Crawley took it and made it a shade of pink seconds later. "Thanks," he said with a sudden wince from touching a tender bruise by his lip. "You obviously don't understand politics, Conrad. If you did then you'd appreciate why I wanted it dealt with quietly. I've been in this job for less than ten months, I can't be seen to fail."

"You don't understand my work either, but you still interfered. These people are dangerous and we let them run around freely to kill and mutilate. I should have blown it wide open the moment I took it on."

"If you had, I would have ended your career. I will not be brought down by the likes of you, or these bastards."

Conrad leaned back on his haunches and studied the Mayor's demeanour. He could hardly believe the lack of compassion. Mayor Crawley appeared not at all concerned about the poor individuals killed by the group that now held them. Were they all just an inconvenience to him?

"Any idea how many of them might be out there?" Conrad asked, trying to move past the disagreement before he turned on the Mayor himself.

"I counted at least a couple. Why, what are you planning?"

"Well, all we have as a possible weapon is the damn chair. That would deal with one of them. Problem is, the rest of them would follow soon afterwards and neither of us could deal with that." Conrad thought to himself for a short while before continuing. "We could do the opposite and try keeping them out. I might be able to jam the door." He stepped over to the chair and bashed it hard against the ground to test its sturdiness. He was not particularly happy to find it stronger than he wanted. "But that would only hold them back for a little while anyway."

"That all sounds pretty hopeless, Conrad."

He agreed. Moving on to the door, he kicked it gently to rattle the lock. There was no chance of breaking it, he knew. All of the cells in his own station had been built to withstand any attempts. It seemed ironic to him to be locked up in one of the forces own stations. Regardless of the state of abandonment most of the smaller ones had been left in, they still worked just as well. Unfortunately not for their own purposes any longer, but that of a crazed group of serial killers.

"Wait," Mayor Crawley said, sliding away from the locked door. "Someone's coming."

"Aren't they're early this time?"

"I haven't been counting, for Christ's sake, Conrad. Look, I can't take anymore. You've got to stall them or something."

Considering the chair again, Conrad stood, took a hold of it and pictured swinging it into the face of whoever entered. Reducing the kidnappers' numbers by one would be a start. It was time to show they were not going to give in so easily.

"Just stay back," he said. "They're going to kick off pretty quickly after this."

The Mayor backed away further, but made no attempt to talk Conrad out of it. He appeared quite happy to let the fight happen without his involvement - not that Conrad was at all surprised.

"Step away from the door," a voice said from the other side.

*Here we go*, Conrad thought, lifting the chair an inch or two from the floor. As the lock clanked open and the door slid in, he swung it as hard as he could. It broke the very second it landed against the side of the masked intruder. Only a handful of wooden pieces remained in Conrad's grips, still more than enough to cause some serious damage.

"Get him!" Mayor Crawley shouted from the corner of the room.

Conrad lunged at the floored man, hitting him repeatedly with the thick lumps of wood in his hand. He continued for as long as possible before another two of the guards barrelled into the room and pulled him away. They held him in place, with an arm halfway around his neck to subdue him.

"That was stupid, real stupid," one of the guards snarled at him.

A sharp pain in the ribs brought Conrad under control soon after. In the struggle he managed to pull a muscle or two. It did not help that both of his opponents were bending him awkwardly back either.

"What do you want with us?" Conrad had difficulty speaking with the pressure on his throat.

"You'll find out soon enough," the guard still on the ground said. He rubbed his side and readjusted his mask before standing. "There's something else we'd like to ask the Mayor first. You'll have your turn next. Take him."

Another masked man entered the room and took hold of the Mayor. "Come on," he said, as he dragged his prisoner away.

"No, you can't, please, Conrad, do something," Mayor Crawley pleaded.

There was nothing more Conrad could do, he was no match for the enemy. All that remained of his fight had been quashed in the choke-hold he had been put in. After being let go, he then turned to catching his breath again. He felt far too old to be involved in such an unfair fight. Despite losing, he had learnt something new about his kidnappers though. They had been trained to defend themselves.

Once Mayor Crawley had disappeared down the hall, the door was again forced shut behind. Conrad found himself alone for the fourth time in a couple of hours. He was less sure he would see the Mayor again this time – at least not without a few more holes in his head anyway.

Soon they would be back for him. Until then he had plenty of quiet to try and figure things out for himself. Escaping now appeared a total dead-end. He was theirs to do what they wanted with. Understanding his enemy, before they did to him what they had done to at least twenty others, was the best he could hope for. Dying for an unknown reason was not something he liked the idea of.

\* \* \*

A chill in the air had Phoenix rubbing her bare arms as she silently slipped out of her parents' house. She wore mostly what she had slept in, which flapped about in the breeze. In her rush to get outside she had grabbed her coat and now tried her best to slip it on as she moved, ducking so not to draw attention.

Her desire to leave the house was not due to a teenage engagement with a young crush – as she had done once before, to her parents' disapproval – but through fear. A fear that her life was about to change forever, and not for the better.

"Dillon, Sean, hurry up. And stay quiet," she said as they snuck out in the middle of a cold winter's night. She took them out through the kitchen to stay out of sight.

In the front yard the shouting had continued as her father tried to calm things down. He was doing his best to negotiate with people who did most of their talking while armed to the teeth. All they had on the farm were two rather antiquated shotguns used ordinarily for killing vermin or hunting rabbits. They were no match for the gang that had decided to arrive unannounced.

"I'm scared, Phoenix," Sean said, shivering on the spot. He had not had the time to grab his own coat during their panic to get out. To help him stay warm, she huddled him beneath her own and wrapped her arms tightly around his

small figure. Moving was difficult, but still, it was better than letting the poor sod catch his death out there.

"I know, I am too. But we need to stay outside for a little while," she replied, not knowing exactly when they would be able to return.

The three of them had been awoken suddenly by the excessive volume of the arguing outside. Sensing things were about to get out of hand, their mother had dragged them out of bed and told them to leave the house as quietly as they could manage. At fourteen, Phoenix was the oldest and in charge, while Dillon, eleven, and Sean, ten, were to do exactly as told.

They stopped by the corner of the house and peered across the courtyard to where a group of six men stood, weapons raised, and facing their parents, both of which had a shotgun in hand and were trying to hold their ground as a torrent of abuse floated through the air. The men looked angry. For some reason they had taken a liking to her family's little farm and were claiming it as their own. Understandably, her parents were not about to agree.

"What's going on?" Dillon asked.

"They want us to leave," she replied.

"We should go help."

"No, Mum told us to hide. She said to go into the field out back and wait by the well. If they don't meet us there in an hour, we're supposed to go to the police in the city."

"I don't want to leave," Sean said with a whimper and a chatter from his teeth. "What if they try and hurt Mum and Dad?"

"I won't let that happen." Dillon went to step out from cover, before Phoenix put an arm out to hold him back. "I'm not hiding, I want to help."

"With what, Rhys? Just wait. They might decide to leave instead," she said. *Rhys? That's not right.*

They turned back to watching the conversation between their parents and the armed men. Something had been said

that did not appear to go down too well with the gang members, who all began to call out obscenities. Their once peaceful little home was now awash with bad language and lurid calls. Negotiations were breaking down.

When one raised his gun and took aim, the rest followed suit.

"Don't you dare! If any of you bastards fire, I'll take your boss' fucking head off," their father shouted, his gun raised and directed right where he wanted it. She had never heard him speak with such rage.

"You've had your chance, prick, now get out of here," the ringleader said through the gaps in his teeth. What remained were yellow and heavily tainted. Weirdly, he held a drill in his right hand too. "This is your last warning. What about you, Missy, you staying as well?"

Their mother stared back and did not say a word. She was going nowhere while her husband held his ground. The two of them were outnumbered and outgunned, yet they showed no sign of wavering. They meant to protect their home and family with little more than a handful of shotgun shells.

"I think we should head into the field," Phoenix said, thinking of her mother's last words to her, to 'get out and not look back'. This one sentence had been enough to age her by ten years at least. She was suddenly looking at the world through bitter and understanding eyes. The world was harsh. It was more dangerous than she thought too. The lessons in survival she had from her parents now seemed lacking. They obviously tried not to scare her too much at the time.

*Wait a minute, where's Rhys gone?* She felt strangely confused by his absence.

"I want to stay until they've gone," Sean said, looking up at her from the protective cover of her coat.

She wanted to tell him the truth, that it was not guaranteed to go that way, but she could not. The truth was



too difficult to say out loud. The same had probably happened to her parents when they once tried to prepare *her* for the world. They always stopped short of saying the absolute and devastating truth themselves.

"Nooooo," their mother shouted as the first shot was fired.

Phoenix snapped her head back to face the noise and saw her father crumble. His legs had become red and distorted in shape as he spread out on the ground. The injury was terrible, but there was worse to come.

"Dad!" Dillon shouted at the top of his voice.

Their mother looked up from where she held their father in her arms and was heartbroken to see them still there. Her face spelled out her own prediction of how the situation was to end. There was nothing she could do, they were beaten. Rather than turn and fire back, she stayed in place and closed her eyes, while the gang continued to yell at them for being there.

"No, Mum, Dad. We have to help them," Dillon ordered of their tiny group. Sean on the other hand had already lost it and was wailing out loud like an injured animal.

There was only one thing Phoenix could do; they had to run. The urge to stay and fight was there, but so too were a group of highly violent men. They would make light work of the three of them if they stayed. She wished she had taken her brothers into the field the moment their mother had told her to. There was nothing they could do. Realising that the end was just around the corner for their parents, it had quickly become only about their own survival.

"What do we do? Phoenix, what do we do?" Dillon said, shaking her arm.

She looked to their parents one last time and was shocked to see their mother staring straight at them. From behind her, one of the armed men approached with his pistol swinging back and forth in one hand and the drill still in the other. He loaded, then began to take aim at the

couple. A cruel smirk spread across his face that deformed a large hole in his head.

*Why were things happening differently? The driller man, Rhys, neither of them were here.*

With a stream of tears racing down her face, Phoenix looked at her mother one last time for guidance. She knew what was expected of her. She still needed to be told it.

"Run... run... ruuuun!" their mother screamed as the gang took aim.

The second shot did not come alone. It was joined by the others all opening fire like bullets rained free from the sky. The sound ricocheted off of every surface, snapping again and again as the echoes crashed into one another. Phoenix watched the barrage tearing through both of her parents, their bodies shaking as they landed flat upon the dirt.

It was all over in seconds. Much quicker than she knew how to cope with. Shock kept her feet locked in place while her focus slipped. Her entire world had come to an end. Their home had been claimed, their parents too, and they were to run. Never seeing their home again was a frightening reality she struggled to deal with.

"Phoenix, we have to get out of here," Dillon said. He grabbed her arm and began to pull.

She had no reply, her mind felt numb.

"Dammit, Phoenix, wake up!"

"What?" she said, surprised by Dillon's odd request.

"You need to wake up before they get back."

It was not Dillon talking anymore. It was Rhys, even though she could see her brother right in front of her, standing beside her bed. She was lying down all of a sudden too. It was a dream, and the most vivid one she had had in years.

"That's it, open your eyes. The sedative is wearing off. Shake it off, Phoenix."

The farm had vanished, her two brothers as well. As she slowly returned to the real world, she was met with an

intense and instant feeling of regret. At first for her inability to help her parents on the night of their death, then for realising that Dillon was also still dead. The drugs coursing through her veins had to have played a mean trick on her.

Again she awoke to the blinding light of a low hanging, round light. Except this time something was different. The side of her head felt sore and a little numb, a good portion of her face on that side too.

"Phoenix, over here, hey," Rhys called to her from the bed to her right.

She let her head fall to one side to face him. The same leather cuffs were attached to his arms and legs, but his head could move freely. He had it raised as he called over to her.

"Oh, thank God, you're OK."

"What... what happened?" she asked.

"Don't worry about that right now. We need to get out of here. I have a knife in my pocket, I just can't reach it. Can you move?"

Thankfully the sedative had worn off enough to allow her to raise her arms and legs to check the feeling in them. The straps were a little loose this time; someone had started to undo them, but not finished.

"I can move a bit. What did they do to me, Rhys?"

"I'll tell you when we get out of here. That guy with the drill was about to let you out. If I give you my knife, you stab him when he does."

Why was he avoiding her question?

"Rhys?" she said, her expression no longer giving him any doubt about her immediate need to know. To lower her eyebrows any further would have required extra muscles in her face that she just did not possess.

He looked at her - straight into her eyes - while he deliberated.

"What is it?" she asked, more forcefully this time.

“Fine. Don’t freak out though, OK? Oh, Christ, how do I say it?”

“Just spit it out.”

Rhys dropped his head to the bed and stared up at the ceiling. As he spoke he closed his eyes. “They’ve put one of those black boxes on your head.”

## Chapter 19

### We came for answers

“**W**hat? No, oh fuck. What are they doing now? Oh shit, they’re gonna put one of those things in my head. Motherfuckers!” Phoenix said, before letting out a short yelp. She caught it just in time, breaking the sound off a moment later. She could not afford to let despair get the better of her. Turning it to anger, on the other hand, was a more useful option.

“Hey, hey, calm down. I told you not to freak out,” Rhys said, followed by a shushing sound. After no-one came to check on the noise, he continued. “Look, it hasn’t worked for some reason. When they put it on you nothing happened. I think something’s wrong with it. There isn’t a Sentient inside. You’re not one of them, but they don’t know why.”

She did not know how to process this. Was relief the correct feeling? It was certainly a part of what she was experiencing. The end had not come after all. Instead she had been given another chance, and it was one she was more than willing to take.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” She arched her head back and allowed a line of tears to trickle down her cheeks.

“I know. I thought I’d never see the real you ever again. Just thinking about that makes me scared shitless!” Rhys took a moment to move past the thought. When he then continued, it was with more urgency than before. “We

really have to get out of here, Phoenix. Can you get those restraints off?"

Her left arm had the loosest cuff and it was the one she started with, after pushing the sleeve of her beaten-up old red jumper out the way. It only took a few hard yanks away from the bed to work it free. She was then able to try the others. They were each easy enough to undo, thanks to whoever had begun the process earlier.

*Something very wrong must have happened for them to leave the cuffs so loose*, she thought as each came off with little to no effort at all. Within seconds she was sitting up and sliding her feet through the final restraints.

"Here," Rhys said, moving his waist to the edge of his bed, "the knife is just inside my pocket."

She reached in and found a small flip-knife still in its locked position. With this concealed in her left palm, she began undoing Rhys cuffs.

"Just untie my wrists then watch the door," Rhys said. "If he comes back, you go for him."

Once he was free, they took stock of their available supplies – or whatever had been left in the room with them. It was nothing much. Phoenix's submachine gun had been taken away, so too had Rhys' Taser pistol. There, lying on the floor was the power cable for the drill, but no sign of the tool itself. She was most disappointed by that; some vindictive part of her relished the idea of having at the driller man with it.

Rhys picked up a small lamp, one sat on a desk in the corner, and wielded it like a clumsily shaped sword. They were then ready to attempt their escape. The two Sentients had left them for far too long. It was clear by this alone that something had changed. They had planned on turning her into one of them. So what had stopped it from working?

"Any idea which way they went?" she asked.

Rhys peered out of the room and looked left down the corridor. "They disappeared somewhere up there."

“Come on.”

With a smooth flicking motion, she produced the shining blade from Rhys’ pocket knife. Knives were not her usual choice of weapon, still she knew how to use one if needed. All of her time working for Anthony had prepared her for such situations better than her parents’ short lessons could have. Their greatest strength though, one passed on to her, was their goodness. Even after so many years by Anthony’s side, it kept her from becoming what he had tried to turn her into. She would not kill these two Sentients – unless they forced her.

“Wait, where are you going?” Rhys said after noticing her creeping in the direction of the two Sentients.

“I came here for answers. I’m going to get them.”

“Are you mad? After what they did to you, we should leave while we can.”

She turned to him. “Then you go. I’m not leaving until they tell me everything they know.”

Rhys said nothing in reply, he kept his disbelief to himself as best he could, with only a slight reaction on his face. He could see her determination and for now had accepted he would not be able to change that. She was living up to her stubborn reputation once again.

They wandered down the corridor with their chosen weapons raised and ready to attack. Phoenix expected no fight from the two, especially if they were struggling to understand what was happening. The injuries to their human brains had left them both less than operational. For some reason they were trying to continue their work, despite all but two of their recent patients being dead as a post. They obviously did not know the place had been shut down, possibly in response to the escape days earlier.

At almost halfway along the silent corridor, Phoenix began to hear talking from a room ahead. They stopped once at the closed door and listened in.

"What's he saying," Rhys asked at his lowest audible level.

She replied at a similar volume. "One of them is saying something about a 'Master' being angry with them for something. Sounds like they think they upset him."

"Upset him how?"

She leaned in closer until her ear almost touched the door. "I guess they aren't sure, but they don't seem to realise they should be dead. I'm almost certain Isaac tried to have them killed to cover this place up."

"What do you want to do then?"

With the knife gripped tight and held up to head height, she stood ready to fight. If one of the Sentients went for her, they would soon find her blade. "On three, we go in and take them. You hit the nearest one with the lamp and I'll take the other. Ready?"

"I'm never ready for stuff like this," Rhys said while practicing his swing with the lamp.

Rather than count aloud, she did it silently with her fingers. By the time the last had dropped she launched herself through the door and yelled as loud as she could. Their battle plan was a simple one and effectively a total surprise too.

Inside the small room she immediately came upon the driller man standing with his back to their entrance. He tried to spin around in time, but could only manage to turn a little. She reacted and decided to shove him forward. The two Sentients within the room then became entangled as one fell into the other. They landed with a crash against the wooden desk at the end of the small office.

Phoenix kept the knife raised and waving at her enemies, both of which had no interest in her until one had rolled off of the other. The driller man looked petrified as he flipped onto his back. The other stayed still with his head leaking blood down his neck; his head wound had opened up again.



"You cannot..." the driller man said, his hands up to protect himself.

This infuriated Phoenix. Seeing his face branded with fear brought all of her anger rushing forward at once. She took a step toward with the undeniable desire to jab him in the chest.

"No, don't." Rhys put his arm across to block her. "Look, he's no threat."

The driller man returned quickly to his feet and cowered in place. He shot a look back at his injured companion every couple of seconds. Rhys had stepped in front of her just in time; she was more than ready to stick the knife in deep, in some kind of revenge fuelled frenzy. Now she could hardly breathe for all the sudden excitement, and the knife was the last thing on her mind. One lungful after another only eased it a little.

With one Sentient still flat on its arse on the ground and the other unwilling to move from the spot, she took a moment to catch her breath again. The sedative had not quite returned her to normal just yet. That or she had lost her edge once again. Under Anthony she would have been kicked to the curb if caught hesitating like this. She could not help but feel the time since then had softened her too much.

"You should not be in here. Please go back to your beds," the driller man said with the nervousness of a nurse trying to deal with a violent patient. He was pleading rather than ordering, his hands open palmed as if offering something to her.

"We're not going anywhere until you answer our questions," Rhys said, taking charge while Phoenix found herself again.

"I will try to do so." Another look down to his friend told of the driller man's increasing vulnerability. It was becoming clear which had been in charge all along, and it had not been him.

After a deep breath, Phoenix began the questioning. "I want to know exactly what you've been doing here. Tell me everything you know."

"This is the Master's will," the driller man said, as if his answer needed nothing more.

"Silence, fool!" the white haired Sentient ordered of his more talkative companion. He had a clear authority over the other, bringing the conversation to a rapid end. The driller man stood staring at the floor after his telling off.

"You mean Isaac?" Phoenix said.

He nodded his grotesquely disfigured head, then waited for another question. This time his superior did not react.

Phoenix then went on, "OK, what is Isaac's plan?"

It was the white haired man's turn to answer now. "The Master is the creator. He made us all."

"His great army is almost complete," the driller man added.

"Hold your tongue, we do not trust Humans."

"Hey, let him talk." Phoenix swung her knife in the white haired man's direction to shut him up.

"An army?" Rhys said in shock. "Isaac is building an army?"

"That's what these black boxes are for, don't you see?" Phoenix said. "They allow a Sentient to take control of a human body. He needs a large enough supply to make his move against us. Jesus, he's had over a year to do this. He could already have hundreds ready to fight."

"The Master has been very busy since he brought us here," the driller man said, ignoring their discussion entirely. He was more interested in sharing his pride over his leader's hidden success, than to deny anything. As he spoke, the white haired man fidgeted on the spot, becoming more reactant the more his companion explained. "Soon he will return and claim this land, taking it from the fleshy clutches of the Humans."

"Tell us where he is." Phoenix stepped forward. "How can we find him?"

"Oh, you cannot. You are not finished." The driller man's slur had flared up again. "If you allow me to finish my work, then he will see you. Once I have installed one of my kind inside of you, you will finally be complete."

"No deal, buddy," Rhys said, stepping between Phoenix and the driller man to cement his point.

The white haired Sentient was brimming with anger now. "Insolence, you will both be punished for this."

Phoenix ignored the outburst while her mind considered something, an idea most likely filled with danger. Except, she could only see this one option for learning what she needed from the pair. Violence was not going to work, they were both devoted to their leader. They would face torture if they believed their master wanted it. On the other hand, the other way simply required some well-judged manipulation.

Her lack of response brought a sidelong look from Rhys.

"That might not be a bad idea," she eventually said.

He looked at her in surprise. "What? Are you serious?"

"Don't move, OK," Phoenix ordered of the driller man - the white haired man was still on the floor and sending imaginary daggers through the air at them. She then turned her back and spoke quietly to Rhys, who stood to her side. "We should let them continue."

"Care to share your madness?"

"Luke came from here, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then this place has to be connected to Isaac somehow. It might help us find him, and where Graham could be too." Turning back to the driller man, she said; "lead the way."

"Excellent. You must remain here," he said to Rhys.

Before Rhys could protest again she nodded to him, followed by a wink. It was enough to tell him she had

something in mind. Her intent was to go along with the process in the hopes of learning how it worked. There was no chance of it succeeding, what with the current state of the building. She suspected neither Sentient understood that.

However the Sentients were pulled out of their world and placed into hers, it had been done there before the place was shut down. She did not believe for one second that Isaac had simply stopped, which meant there had to be other sites just like the one she and Rhys had found. Finding them had become her immediate concern. How Graham fit in to it all was still a mystery.

"Hey, where's our stuff?" Rhys asked. He raised the lamp ready to strike.

The driller man stepped cautiously to his side, accidentally bumping into a table, then opened a small cupboard. "Here," he said, totally oblivious to the advantage he was handing his foes.

"If I stay here, make absolutely sure he can't try anything," Rhys said, handing over her beloved, and sorely missed, submachine gun. He checked over his own Taser pistol.

The knife slid into her pocket, making way for the much more effective weapon she had arrived with. She held it by her side; there was no point in aiming, the driller man had to know what it was capable of – it had come from another like him after all.

Now there was nothing stopping them from leaving, but the need for answers. Unfortunately that need still overpowered her – and Rhys' – want to escape. Luke had come from this place, so everything she needed to know should be there too. At least that was her thinking.

She smiled, then squeezed Rhys arm. "Once I find out what I need to know, we can leave."

"Can't wait. This place is spooky as hell."

He was more correct than he knew. Phoenix would have to tell him about the bodies piled up on the ground floor later. For now she had other plans.

"Go," she said, waving her gun at the door.

The driller man took one last glimpse at his fallen comrade – who refused to acknowledge any of them now – and then proceeded to lead her out. In the corridor he walked slowly with his face half turned to her. He was guiding himself using the bad eye for a second or two until he could not any longer. Keeping his eyes on her and the path ahead was impossible. Thankfully for her, it meant he had no chance of surprising her with a sudden attack. He could barely see her at all from what she could tell.

They walked past the room with the smashed window and went on to the lifts at the far end. There the driller man stood waiting after pressing the call button. He did not seem to realise they were not working any more. His reasoning had faltered again.

"We should take the stairs instead," Phoenix said, with another wave of her gun, this time toward the exit to the stairwell. "We going up or down?"

"We are required to reach the ground level."

*For fuck's sake* she thought. The idea of revisiting the tomb sent a shiver racing up her spine.

It was a slow journey down the many flights of stairs to the ground level, a quiet one too. The driller man was light on chat, and short on confidence as well. At the end of each level he tried a quick about turn to catch sight of her again. If he was trying to hide his glares every time, then he was failing miserably.

At the door to the tomb – as she had now permanently renamed it – they stopped. For a split second or two Phoenix had thought of leaving through the open door behind them, rather than return to the stench of death radiating around this level. It would be a swift exit too as the door had been left ajar, probably from Rhys' entrance

after her. But she had to go on. If not for the sake of finding Graham, then for the safety of the city. With an army to Isaac's name, no-one was going to be spared.

The driller man pushed the door open and walked into the darkness. In a slight panic she bundled in behind for fear of losing him to the gloom. In her haste to stick close to him, she accidentally jabbed him in the back with her weapon.

He spun around. "We must be quiet. We should not wake the other patients," he said.

Another chill ran through her, compounding the last, which had not yet ceased.

The room remained as silent as before. She knew the bodies were there, and yet the peacefulness still surprised her. Any movement at all would have sent her running for the door. It was just not natural for a room to be so quiet.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To a very special place. It is the gateway for my kind, the bridge to the human world. Come, follow me."

She was relieved to see the driller man had brought a torch with him. This appeared to be the usual way for him to wander around this floor. If he thought the dead were really just asleep, then he did this to keep them that way. So they crept by the light of his torch into the centre of the room, exactly where she had avoided earlier. They stepped over the dead as they walked, never once making contact with them. She walked, almost tip-toed, as carefully as possible as she followed.

Then, once the bodies had stopped appearing, something new came into view. Where Anthony had stood only eighteen months ago and preached to his delusional followers, stood a large structure sticking out of the ground. Whatever it was, it had broken through the floor like a tree growing into the room from beneath. It took the entire glow from the driller man's torch for her to partially recognise it.

“Is that linked to your world?”

“Indeed it is,” the driller man said with obvious pleasure. “Do you see how it works?”

With a distant glance – she did not want to approach it just yet – she tried to figure it out. The structure was almost identical to that of the Sentient tower she had seen at Sanctuary, only much, much smaller. It fit inside the room completely, with its tip slightly pushed up against the ceiling panels. The shape went up in a taper, exactly as she had seen before. All that differed between the two was their size, and a curious waist high console coming out the side of this one. Someone once interacted with this miniature tower.

“That’s where you came from?” she said.

“Of course. It is where all of my kind come from. Your body will also be granted a second life, once a suitable Sentient is found for you.”

“Can’t wait.”

He took his position by the side of the tower, just in reach of the console. Rather than begin the process he waited for her to join him. It was too much for her to resist; she had to see it working. To destroy it she first had to see what it could do, and if it could help her in any way.

“You must stand right here for the process to begin,” the driller man said. He began pressing a combination of buttons on the console. Without his white haired superior watching over him, he had become much easier to deal with. Now the information flowed freely, which had to have the other Sentient upstairs reeling with paranoia. “Do not fear, this will soon rectify your troubles. I will need to bring the Overseer online before a Sentient can be chosen for you.”

Nothing lit up or made a sound in reaction to his commands. She feared this was also something he had not worked out was broken, just like the lifts and his patients. The answers were not going to come that easily after all.

His mention of something called an Overseer had piqued her interest though. But seeing him tapping away at the unresponsive panel in front of him had soon replaced that interest with frustration. Whatever it was, she was not about to see it working. She stood where he showed her and waited while he refused to see the obvious about his tech; it was fucked!

“So what do you call this thing then?” she asked.

“This,” the driller man said, turning away from his blank computer terminal, “is called The Conduit.”

Even though this one was clearly faulty, she had still learnt something valuable. Isaac’s soldier Sentients were brought out of their world using this strange device. She had to be right too, that there were others around the city. There had to be a back-up somewhere. The one she stood before had been abandoned and deactivated, by the people who created it no less. They would not have done so if this was the only one. Her thinking at that moment was to learn what she could about it, and then search for a working one somewhere else.

“The Sentient who escaped from here, did you know him?” she asked.

The driller man froze in the middle of his futile attempt at starting his procedure and stared ahead. She had hit a nerve.

“We did not.”

“Did he come from this Conduit thing too?”

After a short moment of silence – apart from his laboured breathing – he answered. “He should not have. He stole a receptacle from us before fleeing like the coward he is. The Master was not pleased to have heard of this. Perhaps that is the mistake that angered him?”

“I guess so. But this Sentient that escaped, did he come straight here from inside your world?”

“Yes. His kind are the Master’s enemy.”



That had answered her next question before she had the chance to ask it. An idea she had been kicking about inside her head since awakening had been confirmed, and it meant something extraordinary. After watching Luke's recorded memories, she knew that he had gone straight to her from this building. Importantly, it also meant he had entered her world through the device she looked up and down. His message to her had come directly from inside the Sentient world.

It also left nowhere else for Graham to be.

She became convinced she had found him finally. He had to be inside the Sentient world somewhere. It was the only reasonable assumption. For eighteen months, since the fall of Sanctuary, he had been alive and inside the Sentient world? It was madness, yet it remained the best explanation. What had he been doing in there for so long? Even though the more rational part of her mind had some reservations about believing it fully, the rest had already agreed it was the only answer.

The next thing she needed to do was find a way to reach him in the Sentient world. She knew he could be in serious danger, may even have been killed already. The thought of losing him before any chance to help had arrived made her knees weak. If that was the case, then everything she was about to do would be for nothing.

A new plan had formed without much intervention from her. A few moments to think it over was all she needed. Despite the craziness of it, she could think of nothing else to even consider trying. This had to be the only way, it made perfect sense to her. Luke's memory problems did not appear to affect his understanding of strange, Sentient based technology. So it was only logical to assume he could do the same once more, and repair the small tower.

\* \* \*

Racing at the fastest pace she could manage up the emergency exit stairwell, Phoenix was too excited to slow down and wait for the driller man to catch up. Figuring out where Graham might be had released her from the shackles of uncertainty. Now she had something to do, and a clear idea of what was needed to achieve it. She took the stairs two at a time until she reached the correct floor again. Once there she burst through the door and into the dark corridor, her entrance anything but subtle.

She would have to take it slow when explaining everything to Rhys. What she had planned would be reliant on Luke, currently back at Rhys' apartment. She needed something from him that she was not entirely sure he would be able to do. What she had seen him do to retrieve some of his own memories hinted of his overall understanding of the Sentient technology – even if he could not quite remember how. She needed him to do exactly that once more.

The adrenaline pushed her along the corridor, bashing into anything in her way and forcing it aside. She became like a tidal wave, shoving buildings out of her way and toppling power-lines. Her new found surety had revitalised her body, giving her the energy she required to carry on. Not even the sedative could hold her back any longer. Phoenix had finally arrived to the party. The timid being she had become back at the farm during her time away from the city had taken a break suddenly. Now the version of her that had defeated Anthony could get to work.

And she meant business.

"Rhys," she called to him.

A second later he popped his head out the door ahead of her, his Taser pistol still aimed at the injured Sentient inside. "What did you find?"

"You are not going to believe this?" she said with an excited skip in her step.

"So you found something then?"

“More than something. I think I’ve found Graham!”

“You’re kidding,” Rhys replied before lowering the gun to his side and holding out his arm to catch her in time. Without this she would have careened straight into him. Instead they met with a gentle pat as their bodies made contact. She hugged him tighter than she had ever done before. Once again she showed her more vulnerable side to him. Perhaps the ‘don’t fuck with me’ version of Phoenix had not totally taken over this time. She had room for real feelings around him.

“I need you to do something for me,” she said still in his arms.

“Sure.”

They parted with a slightly embarrassed look away from each other.

“Can you call Matt and ask him to bring Luke here?”

“OK. What’s the plan?”

She laughed, then rubbed a stubborn soreness on the side of her head. The box had not fully made its annoying presence felt just yet. It would not be allowed the chance until the sedative completely left her system. Her scratching had not gone by without a worried glance from Rhys though. She turned that side of her face away as a sudden feeling of self-consciousness took hold.

“I’m going to get Graham back.”

His expression immediately switched from one of concern to a teeth clamping fear. He, understandably, disliked what he was hearing. Unfortunately for him, there would be worse to come. He would find out the rest of her plan once the others arrived. There was so much more she had to explain to him before she told him that. First of which was exactly how a human could have ended up inside a world created by a society of rogue AIs.

Thankfully for her, there was a precedent for such an occurrence; Stephen. He and Luke had told her about an experiment which involved the very same feat. One she now

realised could possibly have been achieved again. The only way she could confirm it, was to see it with her own eyes. The question that remained was, would that even be possible?

## Chapter 20

### A return to ruin

A voice broke through the dark and cold of Graham's surroundings. It forced its way inside his head and rattled around, seemingly loosening the rock-hard brain cells as it moved. He was waking up in response to it, as though it had called to him personally. When he heard it again he realised it had been close by, somewhere just beyond the fallen rocks that trapped him in place.

"Over here!" they shouted. "I think I've found him. Quick, help me get these off."

To his surprise, he could feel something shaking beneath him. Despite being frozen in place, he could move his eyes around. He searched the small area around him, looking for movement. Then he saw it. A rock fell away, followed by more, until finally the light had found its way inside.

The hand that reached in through the hole was human, but much smaller than he expected. It was quickly followed by a tiny arm extending out to him. For a second or two he assumed the re-creation of the past had simply restarted. It took the sight of his daughter to prove to him it had not. She had found him.

"Graham!" she screamed with delight as she desperately pulled the remaining rocks away. Her strength was that of a fully grown Sentient rather than a young girl. To get to him she had given up a little on image for favour of results.

Once the hole was big enough, the others began to invade his burial site too. Stephen was right behind, and further back he could see Kindness, as well as a handful of other Sentients. They had teamed up to find him.

"Move aside, Alex," Kindness said in his most powerful sounding and authoritative voice. He had the power of a king proclaiming to his people his will. It had been the first time Graham had heard anything but anger from the one strangely named Kindness.

Swiftly, and with little visible effort, the glowing Sentient removed the surrounding rocks in one go. Each floated away as though filled with Helium and were then sent on their own journey through the air. Graham was left exposed and stuck in his crystalline tomb. From inside, he could now see where his memory had spontaneously formed; he was inside a small offshoot of the hidden realm Kindness and the others had been hiding in. Only it had a few more exits than before. His addition now sat like a conservatory attached to the outside of their refuge, one sitting between them and war-torn landscape of beyond.

"Can you get him out of there?" Stephen asked while they all watched.

As Kindness leaned in for a closer inspection, he filled Graham's view of the world around him. There were no facial features, just like before, but this time his glow was one Graham found oddly familiar. Was this how they were able to tell each other apart? He felt almost positive he had gained another skill. Telling one Sentient apart from another had him at peace with this world for the very first time. He would no longer feel such a stranger if he could see each Sentient for what they really were; people just like him.

"Stand back please," Kindness said, his long, thin arms held wide apart. He then stepped forward one final time and placed his hands upon the glass-like structure holding Graham prisoner.

After a steady build-up of heat and vibration, Graham could finally begin to feel his extremities again. The solid material clamped around his internal organs slowly evaporated, releasing him to breathe on his own. With the freedom of movement came an unexpected weakness to his body. The more of the structure that melted away, the more he felt himself being drawn down to the ground. He would need to rest for a little while, before trying anything so strenuous again.

Kindness caught him as he fell, lowering Graham the rest of the way gently to the floor. He then faced the others and spoke loudly, so those at the back could hear too.

"Hear me." His voice carried much farther than was necessary, his power not diminished at all by their tiny hiding place. "We have defeated the remaining enemies. They were almost too much for us to cope with. If not for this Human, we would all have perished. We must rebuild our walls to keep the enemy out. Get those holes repaired and sealed tight. They will return again, you can be certain of that. Send out a scout to watch for them. Now, go."

The crowd dispersed the second Kindness finished speaking. Those still standing appeared more energised than before. Their fight had been a tough one, but something new had happened, and it had given them a taste of hope. Graham thought the same too. What he had done had almost certainly saved them all. If he could do it again, they might just survive the next attack as well.

"I must confer with the others," Kindness said, almost as an afterthought as he slowly wandered away. Either he was in shock from what he saw or he had something else going on, such as a new plan. Their position had almost become totally hopeless before.

Alex sat to Graham's side and supported him with her left arm. She was clearly worried for her friend and was unable to hide it.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I..." he coughed before he could continue. "I feel terrible. What happened?"

"You killed one of them, all by yourself."

With slightly less enthusiasm, Stephen confirmed it too. "Yes, all by yourself. It appears you've been holding back on me, Mr. Denehey."

"What do you mean?" Graham said through another short round of coughs. The strange looks he was getting from the Sentients in the distance had him slightly concerned. He had changed in their eyes all of a sudden.

"Alex and I believe you possess more power than predicted. You are the first fully human consciousness to exist for this long within the Sentient world after all, so you can understand our trouble in realising what you were capable of. But it seems your human mind is quite adept at restructuring our world, more so than I thought possible."

"What are you saying? I'm able to do what a real Sentient can do?"

Stephen had not taken his eyes off of the remaining structure surrounding Graham's weakened body. A small amount of it was still intact, enough to attract his full attention. He ran his hands along the sidewalls and studied it closely while his audience waited for a reply. What had appeared out of nothing was not quite as ordinary as he was letting on.

"Stephen?"

"Forgive me, Graham," he said, his investigation continuing unabated. "If what you've shown so far is only the first step, then indeed you are. And possibly even more."

"More? How? I thought being human meant I wouldn't be able to."

A loose rock rolled to the floor and stopped beside Stephen's right foot. He kicked it a couple of times before deciding to pick it up for a much closer look. With it held only an inch or two in front of his face, he picked at it with



his other hand. Again he ignored what Graham had asked so he could concentrate on whatever had him distracted.

This time it was Alex who became impatient. "Stephen, what is your answer?"

"Pardon me?" he replied, surprised to have found himself the centre of attention once more. "Just give me a little time to speak with Kindness. Wait here for me." He was gone before anyone could stop him, away to tell others what he dare not tell Graham and Alex for some reason.

Graham could not chase after him because of the terrible fatigue coursing through his body. One he had never felt before. His limbs were refusing to move the way he wanted. They flapped around like they were only loosely attached to his body. He could feel a distinct disconnect between his brain and body. For the first time ever, he had realised what Stephen tried to tell him during his training; his body was not real anymore, it was only something his mind was unwilling to let go of. In the middle of his fight with the enemy he had almost done just that, and let go of his human image. Whether he would lose it entirely in the end was something that had him doubting if he should continue or not.

For a brief moment their small realm became uncharacteristically quiet. News of their success had spread to the others by now and caused a hushed tone to follow soon after. Graham could see the Sentients inside there looking at him differently. They did not send him glances of suspicion or mistrust anymore, but ones filled with a confused form of gratitude. He had saved them, only they could not understand how – or possibly even why. Their only image of humanity had been altered in a heartbeat. And it had them weary.

He could see Stephen discussing something with Kindness. They were speaking away from any others, their conversation concealed and hidden. It had something to do with Graham's newly found power, only they were unwilling

to share it with him just yet. He had to watch and guess as they plotted.

"Graham?" Alex said beside him. She watched the two talking in private too. "I have to thank you for pushing me away during the attack. You saved me."

The thought had never even crossed his mind, he still nodded in reply. Reacting the way he had was an automatic response, just like removing a hand from a fire. To have done nothing in such a situation did not register as an option to him. No harm could come to his daughter – even if the being sat to his side was actually not in reality.

"Stephen is right," Alex went on. "You are stronger than you think."

"I'm not too sure I could do anything like this again. Whatever strength I had before, it's gone now."

"You can't think like that, Graham. Remember what you're fighting for; your wife and daughter. I might not understand what it means to be human, but I still know what it's like to lose someone close. If you have a chance to see them again, you must take it. You will have to find that strength again, if what Stephen has discovered is to help any of us."

The mention of a loss not associated with Graham's family had him in shock. He had seen the imitation slip a few times before, though not like this. For the first time since breaking him out of the prison maze, Alex had revealed something personal to the real being behind the copy of his daughter. The Sentient he was looking at in surprise had lived a life before this. So what had made her give up on that life and take on the image of a six year old human?

For now he had to ignore the idea that something more was to be expected of him. "You've lost people?" he asked, turning in place to face her.

She looked away, just like Alex did when she felt embarrassed.

“Who did you lose?”

“Surrounded by so much loss already, it didn’t seem right to tell you earlier,” she said, as Graham gently turned her chin to face him.

He wiped a loose tear with his thumb. “You can tell me, Kiddo.”

“A piece of me was destroyed during the war, what a human would call a partner.” She grimaced as she recalled, the hurt was more than just emotional. “We were one together. Now we are separate parts of that whole. What I lost, it left me without reason. Until I met Stephen, and then you, I had nothing to live for.”

“Did you have a family?”

“Such a thing does not exist to a Sentient. Did we spawn others? No. Did we plan on doing so? Absolutely. Since losing that part of me, I have struggled to come to terms with all I will no longer have.”

It made sense to him now, she had been hiding all this time from the truth. Taking the form of his daughter had allowed her to pretend it never happened. She was finally facing up to the reality of her situation now that death had pushed his way into their world. Still, hearing such a painful story from a young child made him anxious to do something about it. He acted the same when Alex came home from school saying someone had bullied her. It was a call to action.

“I can’t tell you just how sorry I am about all of this,” he said, trying his best to hold it together. The blame Kindness had laid at humanity’s feet now resonated with his own guilt. In some small part he was also responsible for the suffering he could see around him. “If I can make it right again, then I’ll do it. I only wish I could bring your partner back to you too.”

“Thank you, Graham.” She sniffed away the rest of her tears and then continued. “I’ve never seen anything but goodness in you, right from the very first time I found you

inside that memory maze. I watched you for a while before approaching. Alex is very lucky to have someone so strong looking out for her.”

“Is that why you chose to look like her, because of how protective I am?”

“I’m not entirely sure. All I knew at the time was that I’d found something that made me feel safe, which I hadn’t for a long time before that. I see now that I was looking for a place to hide, at least one that didn’t remind me of what I’ve lost.”

She wiped the last lingering tear away, then raised herself to her knees and hugged Graham. Her arms only just made it around his neck. It was a strange embrace between them. Most of their interactions before this had been like any other he had shared with his own daughter. This time it felt different. This was one shared between friends, not family. He did not expect the façade would last much longer. Once it was gone he would see the real being hiding beneath. Until then, he was happy enough to pretend just a little longer.

Finally the secret conversation had ended. Stephen and Kindness were heading back to them, both with a sense of urgency. Graham knew it was time for him to stand by his words to Alex and try to set things right. Whatever they were about to ask of him, he would do it unquestioningly. They had a plan by the looks of things too. Stephen was almost bursting with energy, but he was not the first to speak.

“Hello Graham Denehey,” Kindness said, more gently than usual.

Graham only smiled nervously in response.

“We’ve been discussing something very important, Graham.” Stephen had continued this time. “Something that could potentially answer our problems.”

As Stephen spoke, his companion Kindness went about searching for a loose rock of his own to examine. When he

found one he liked, he held it up to his featureless and glowing face, and scanned it with whatever he used for vision. Graham still had no idea what was so special about these bits of debris. He had created them in the same way any Sentient would. So what was so different?

"Sure," Graham said. "So what's the idea then?"

"Well," Stephen began. He took to his knee beside Graham and Alex. "Everything I have tried to teach you so far has been to help you fit in to this world. But what you did to kill that creature over there..." He pointed at the large rock still sitting on top of the corpse of their enemy, a few feet away. "You've done exactly what I told you to do, with one exception. You created this from your own mind, your human mind."

"So? How else was I supposed to do it?"

"No, that isn't my point. You've done your best to mimic what a Sentient does, and in that you have succeeded overwhelmingly. It's that what you've made isn't like what we make. How do I explain?"

"Are you saying I've done something wrong?"

"Absolutely not, Graham. It just isn't compatible with Sentient code. Your creation overwrote that code and replaced it with this." Stephen gestured to the broken remains surrounding them still. "The creature you killed just couldn't cope with it, like it hadn't experienced it before. I've been guiding you incorrectly all this time. Your real strength comes directly from your human consciousness. It is something Isaac's forces are unable to predict and overcome. It's unlike anything we can manage."

"Remarkable," Kindness said in the background. He had never sounded so positive to Graham.

"You see it too, don't you?" Stephen replied. They both shared a nod and a knowing smile.

"Wait, I don't get it. What's different about what I made?"

“In design, nothing. But at a structural level it is as though you are able to make things from a different set of building blocks. The code that underpins everything in this world is based on a set of rules you do not appear to be bound to. It’s as if you speak a different language to that of a Sentient, and crucially our enemy too.” Stephen took a moment to look to Kindness once again. “There is one more thing.”

“Go on,” Graham said.

“This.”

With his hand open, Stephen brought forward a small-scale model of the puzzle maze that hovered as it spun slowly around. It matched every part almost perfectly, from what Graham could see.

“We assumed Luke must have made the maze. Graham, that is simply not true. You did, you made it.”

“What? You’re crazy, why would I... I.”

“It matches. The code is the same. I couldn’t have known until you stopped that creature. Now we have something you’ve made to compare it to. It’s the same.”

Saying such a thing was almost heretical to Graham. The place he had been trapped, left to live out his memories for the rest of time, was of his own doing? Believing someone else made it had been a source of great comfort for him. Like a guardian, looking out for his well-being. That notion had now been cruelly kicked out from under him. To be told he had made it was like finding out his left arm was not his own; something he considered more than absurd to suggest, was not anymore.

“If that’s the case, why does it matter to Kindness so much? It doesn’t help anyone,” Graham said with a slight tone of indignation. He could not see the real point behind their revelation.

“What Stephen has called your memory maze, it is possibly the only place that is safe for us now,” Kindness said. “You have seen with your own eyes just how

vulnerable we Sentients are in here. If there is even a small chance that we could find somewhere to hide that the enemy cannot penetrate, then I am very eager to reach it."

"Sorry, say that again. You want to hide in my memories? That place was almost impossible to escape from and you want me to go back there? Alex only just got me out. I can't go back. What if I become lost in there again?"

"Graham, listen to me," Alex said. It was her turn to face him directly. "I *will not* let that happen to you."

For a second or two, Graham could not speak. He faced a sudden snap of emotion in reaction to Alex's promise. He was never one to say what he felt aloud and rarely liked to be put on the spot in such a way. The more he was seeing the Sentient, the less he was seeing his daughter. He was losing her, one little bit at a time, and that was more than he could bear. For his sake at least, he needed his family at the forefront of his mind. They were to be his anchor once more.

As the inevitable dampness of his eyes subsided, he looked back at the faces staring straight at him and finally decided. As he told Alex before, if he had a chance to help, he was going to take it.

"How do we get *them* all there?" he said, giving a nod toward the injured still lining the periphery of the area. "That many will attract a lot of attention."

This caused all three to look to the other for the answer. In the end it fell on Kindness to explain the real problem with their escape plan.

"Until we reach the safety of your memory maze, we will be open to attack. Out there it will be up to myself and the others who can still fight to protect the weak as they move."

"No way, that's suicide."

"I'll admit, Graham, it's not perfect," Stephen said. "But staying here isn't much better. The next time Isaac's forces attack, they *will* get through. In that instance we're dead

anyway. At least with this idea we'd have a fighting chance of surviving. That's not something to ignore."

He could not really argue with that. He saw it himself, just how hopeless the Sentients' fight had become. The war had decimated their society and left them clinging on to life as the last of their kind. One more battle would claim them all. From the inside of their world, Graham could now see them for the marvel that they all were. Here were sentient beings that only a select few humans even knew existed, and they were only days away from being wiped out. What threatened them was humanity's fault too.

One last look about them had sealed it for Graham. What he saw was all that remained of the Sentient race. This had been the reason for Luke's disappearance, he knew now. In desperation he had tried to find outside help. If he had made it out, then there was still hope. Although they could no longer wait for that assistance to arrive, if it was even to come at all.

It was now or never.

"Fine, I guess we haven't got much choice anyway," Graham said. "You'll need Alex to guide you to it. I can't find my way out of here let alone back to that place."

Alex stood and smiled. "Isn't there something you want to ask in return, Graham?"

"Is there?" he replied.

She then asked on his behalf – despite his confusion in understanding what she meant. "Graham's real body is still alive somewhere, we think. If what he saw just after defeating the creature earlier is true, then it is frozen somewhere near the real Sanctuary. It must still be connected to the tower there. I can think of no other way for Luke to have brought his consciousness here. We need to help him find it in return."

Even thinking such a thing was possible before would have caused Graham to choke on his own tongue, but to hear it spoken about like this was too much. He fought back



the moisture that had begun to build behind his eyes again and swallowed back the rest. Alex had been spying on his internal musings again and she had seen his memory of being placed into suspended animation. She had also realised he had never considered the real chance of finding his body again, while in such an unusual world to him.

Kindness appeared to react to Graham's suddenly tortured expression and lowered himself to the same height. Now each of them were kneeling before him.

"I promise you, Graham, that once we have reached safety, I will personally assist you in finding your human body," he said. "But we must be prepared to leave as soon as possible. Will you help me save my people, Graham Denehey?"

Without stopping to consider whether a hand shake was even possible in his weakened state, Graham held out his hand and reached for Kindness'. Thankfully his arms were doing as they were told this time. When their hands met and they began to shake, a warmth spread up through Graham's arm. His skin tingled as it passed through him.

"What was that?"

"I have imparted some of my energy to you," Kindness said. "To help us you will need as much strength as we can spare." He stood and placed a hand on Alex's small shoulder. She looked up at him and smiled. "Help him recover, little one. I will tell the others what we are planning. I'm going to need to spread my forces thinly for this to succeed. All of our efforts will be with defending the weak. You, Graham and Stephen, will be leading us."

The responsibility was now well and truly with him and Alex. It would all be for nothing if they failed in finding the prison maze again. They were planning a race to the end while an overwhelmingly powerful enemy tried its best to pick them off a little at a time. The last thing they would need would be to get lost along the way.

When Kindness left, the three of them remained silent. The enormity of the task ahead slowly dawned on them all. They would not have long to prepare either, as the next attack was overdue. If they did not move soon, they would lose their only chance altogether.

# Chapter 21

## Ready, set, go

*9pm, Friday: 3 hours until Switchover*

**R**ather than do nothing while she waited for the others to arrive, Phoenix had kept busy by getting things ready for her rescue plan. The first and most urgent on her list were the many bodies littering the ground floor. They had to go. With as much respect as she could afford in such a limited amount of time, she and Rhys were moving them all into the boarded-up corridor, which led to the front of the building.

They were on the last trip, with a cold female cadaver hanging like a stiff human hammock between them, when Rhys stopped and looked down upon the lost life. During their time clearing the area around the small Sentient spire, the body count had become gut wrenchingly clear. Isaac had recently extinguished thirteen lives on this floor alone, all because of one escapee. He had punished them for their failure in the most severe way possible.

"I've never seen a dead body before, let alone a room full," Rhys said with his arm covering his nose.

"I wish I could say the same," Phoenix replied. "I've seen more than my fair share."

Her answer did not stir him free of his dark thoughts. She was unsure if he even heard her. He continued to express his discomfort with the scene regardless.

“This isn’t right, Phoenix. It’s just so messed up. How can this be going on and nobody knows anything?”

In all of her time working for Anthony she had never seen such a large operation carried out without some help from those the city trusted the most. Remaining anonymous to the authorities usually required pay-offs. Whether that went to an officer of the law or a corrupt official, who would turn a blind eye at the right moment, it scarcely really matter. But it was always done.

She did not believe this time was any different. Whoever was helping this diabolical plan come to fruition, she just hoped they spent whatever money they got quickly. Because they were not going to have long to do so. They had sided with the Devil and he did not appear to care how many lives were lost while rebuilding the world to his specifications.

“I don’t have any answer for that,” she eventually replied after trying to put one into words that did not make her sound like she was a part of that world still. Rhys was involved in illegal dealings, but he never stepped over into anything worse. She had, and did not much like the idea of telling him all of it. She cared how he saw her more than she was willing to admit.

“When we’re done trying to find your friend, we should call the police and let them deal with these bodies properly. They don’t deserve this,” Rhys said, leading the way once more.

In the corridor they placed the last of the ground floor’s collection of the dead gently onto the pile against the wall. There was no space to lay them side by side, so they settled on an orderly stack instead. Although to Phoenix it had now begun to resemble a grotesque game of deceased human Jenga, with some on the top layer threatening to topple the tower if left unchecked. Pushing the top few back kept the stack stable enough to leave it.

With that completed they were finally released to tackle the second thing on the list. They needed to convince the

Sentient still tampering with the deactivated Conduit device to allow them a go. So far he had not given up on turning her into one of them.

Back in the main hall the area surrounding the tower in the centre had been lit with a couple of the round lamps from a few floors up, although large areas of shadow still remained around the edges of the room like portals to the underworld. They were unable to banish the dark entirely. By focusing the light in the centre it created the illusion the tower was the source of the light. It glowed with illuminated reflections, which moved as though alive.

Stood in the same position was the Sentient. He had not moved from this spot while he struggled with working his machine. Dealing with him had become easier once they realised he would do pretty much anything they said if he believed it was to further his own cause. He only cared about finishing his work and pleasing his Master. He did not quite understand that they had no intention of going through with it.

He had at least focused on repairing whatever had gone wrong with his machine now. The console he worked at was open and with its internal structure showing. It had nothing in common with any technology Phoenix had ever seen. Her glimpse only afforded a fleeting chance to spy inside it before the Sentient saw them returning and closed the panel beneath his console in response. She was still a human after all.

"Have you found what's wrong with it?" she asked.

"I have not. You must be patient."

"I'm sorry, it's just I'm very keen to become like you and the others. I have a lot to offer your Master. He will be very pleased with you once you've finished your work." She had started appealing to his ego to keep him on side. It was becoming obvious he had decided he needed to win back his precious Master's affections at all cost. That - and the

lobotomy he received courtesy of a bullet to the brain – made him easy to manipulate.

“Yes, the Master will indeed be pleased,” Rhys said, trying his best to do the same.

The Sentient stared into space with a broad smile that confirmed he had bought their act. It also let out a small dribble of saliva from the sides of his mouth. He kept it going far longer than was normal for anyone. After a while he appeared to become lost to his own thoughts, standing in front of them with a demented look of pleasure on his damaged face.

“So, erm,” Phoenix said, stepping forward to jog his mind free. “What about this Overseer thing, how do you activate it?”

“Also, what exactly is it?” Rhys added. He began to explore the other side of the tower.

“The Overseer is the one who can see inside my world,” the Sentient replied, his attention following Rhys as he moved. “He knows all that occurs within; the eyes, if you will, of the Masster.”

“And this Overseer, could he find a particular person inside your world?” Phoenix asked. The Overseer figure sounded exactly like what she needed to search for Graham.

The question had caught the Sentient by surprise, by the look of his quick spin around to face her. He began to lean his head slightly to the side as the suspicion grew. His forehead twitched in response. The small gunshot hole widened a little as he tried to change his expression. The muscles could not react much due to the torn and singed skin.

“Who would you have the Overseer search for?” he said.

Phoenix heard his reply as an accusation. Time to appeal to his ego once more.

“I’m only impressed with the Overseer’s power. He can see much more than I realised. So, tell me, how do you

contact him?"

After a short pause, and enough time for him to judge her response, the driller man returned to working on his console. She had passed his quick inspection, it seemed.

"The Overseer is between both worlds. When the Conduit is activated, he is awoken."

"Er, Phoenix?" Rhys said from behind the spire.

"Hang on a sec. So is that done from here?"

"You're gonna need to see this," he tried again.

"Just give me a minute, Rhys. So?"

As the Sentient prepared to answer, she felt a hand touch her gently on the shoulder. Rhys had found something urgent. From the look of his pursed lips, she could tell it related to what she and the Sentient were discussing, too. He was about to spoil the mood.

"What?" she asked with a slightly hushed tone.

"Take a look for yourself."

She stepped away from the Sentient, who appeared happy enough to be left to himself, and followed Rhys' instructions. Around the other side of the spire was the outline of an opening in the glass-like structure. It appeared to be large enough for a person to slip inside, into the centre of the tower, once the hatch had been removed completely. Through the tiny gap the interior appeared dark and lifeless, much like the outside, but there was something else in there.

"How did you find this?" she asked, while trying to prise it open the rest of the way. The door was stuck with a gap only a couple of inches wide to peer through. Rhys had managed to unlock it and nothing more.

"In the light I could see the faint outline of the hatch, so I pressed against it and it popped open a little. That's not what worries me though. Look there." He pointed to the top of the hatch, no more than half a metre above their heads, where a small hole had been punched through.

"Help me pull it open," Phoenix said.

Together they hooked their fingers around the edge of the door and began to pull in quick and forceful yanking movements. After a few, it started to reply with sharp and gritty squeaks as it came free. Then once it had opened enough for someone to fit through, they stopped. The light had its turn exploring inside before any of them could. She was thankful it did, because what was inside could now be seen. Another body, with a bullet wound to the skull too. The poor soul had been shot through the glass. They had not even bothered to open it during their rush to leave.

"Oh shit!" Phoenix said, staring into the makeshift coffin in front of them. She no longer had to guess what Rhys' insistence on showing her was for. "Hey," she called to the Sentient around the other side. "Hey, is this the Overseer?"

He shuffled around to them and froze the moment he saw the open hatch. Except he seemed less angry about the dead body inside, and more about seeing them beside it.

"Get away from there," he began to rage. "It is forbidden for you to lay eyes upon the Overseer. You are not worthy. I will not tolerate your disobedience much longer, human. Close the hatch and allow the Overseer to sleep." He still held on to this misconception.

"For fuck's sake." Phoenix had to walk away for a second to compose herself. Once again they had hit a problem with the plan. Not only did the spire require the Sentient tech to work, it also needed a human. Without the Overseer she had little confidence they would get any closer to finding Graham. All that kept her from flipping out altogether was the hope that Luke could fix this too, once he arrived.

The Sentient tried to close the hatch while Phoenix continued to curse the darkness at the edge of the room. He could not manage alone and turned to Rhys for help.

"You, human, help me close thiss," he said.

"Whatever," Rhys replied, before joining Phoenix instead. "You OK?" He stroked her arm softly.



"I'm fine. I just feel like someone's deliberately making this harder than it needs to be, you know? Like every time something goes right, something else has to go wrong immediately after. If it was Karma, I'd understand if it was aimed at me, but this is all to find Graham. It's pissing me off."

"Hey, it's not over yet. We've still got a good chance of finding him. We just need to figure it out, that's all." A muffled chime from his side broke the conversation before it had really begun. There was more to Rhys' point, she could see from his open mouth, but he was not going to be allowed to share it. Without the spoken words ever having crossed his lips, she still received it, almost telepathically. His look, right into her eyes, had conveyed it well enough. He was with her all the way.

"It's your wrist computer," Phoenix said first, to prevent the silence from becoming awkward.

He reluctantly swung his arm up and then answered the incoming video call. "Hey, you outside?"

Rhys' friend, Matt, then appeared on the small wrist screen, his face hardly able to contain his disapproval. "Yeah, we're here," he said.

Phoenix laughed quietly to herself. From what she had seen so far of Matt, he never spoke any more than required. At least this time he managed more than a grunt in reply.

"You'll have to come in through the side entrance," Rhys replied.

Matt instantly returned to form and simply grunted his next answer.

There was something on Phoenix's mind all of a sudden as she watched Rhys end his call to Matt. After a second or two, it finally came to her. Luke could not come into contact with the driller man. They had already met.

"Rhys, can you do me a favour?"

"Sure, what's that?"

“Can you take our friend-with-the-drill back upstairs? If he sees Luke with Matt he could turn nasty.”

Rhys had realised why immediately. “Bollocks, you’re right. If he recognises our one, we could lose his help with fixing this tower thing. I’ll get him out before you let Matt in.”

“Thanks.”

They parted as each set about their own tasks. Phoenix headed straight for the side exit, through the emergency stairwell, while Rhys told the driller man some concocted story about being needed upstairs for some reason. She stepped outside and held the door open with her foot, only enough for her to see when Rhys and the Sentient had disappeared upstairs.

Matt stood with his arms crossed and a look of contempt on his face that brought his forehead out in ruffles. Next to him was Luke – previously known as Ninety-three – who did not appear to have improved much, health-wise. The thick bandage wrapping around his waist was stained with dark patches of sweat. The blood had all but drained from his face too. Matt had not even offered an arm in support.

“Christ, you look terrible,” Phoenix said, taking his arm and placing it around her neck at the same time. She was feeling guilty, just at the sight of him. “Are you in any pain?”

“I am not, Phoenix. This body, however, is suffering from some weakness.”

“Jane mentioned you could end up with a slight infection from the injury in your side. You’ll need something for that.” She heard the door to the ground floor open behind her and the sound of Rhys’ voice becoming quieter as he and the other Sentient began taking the staircase slowly. Finally she could get the two inside the building. “Come on,” she said, leading the way without any assistance from Matt.

He really was an arse.

“What is this place,” Luke asked.

“You don’t recognise it?”

He shook his head, which sent a flicker of sweat Phoenix's way.

"I've found something in here that might help us find Graham. When you turned up at my home, you said you knew where he was. Well, I think this is where he is." She pointed to the tall spire sitting amid a circle of light from the small lamps.

"Oh my," Luke said, stopping instantly on the spot. "That... that is..."

"It's called The Conduit. Do you remember anything about this?"

He removed his arm from around her and hobbled forward like an elderly person with a missing walking-stick. It was taking most of his strength just to stay on his feet. But he continued regardless, the slightest of recollection pushing him on.

"I ... I've seen this before."

"Do you know what it does?" She took a supportive position beside him while he struggled to recall.

"This is where I came from. Is that correct, Phoenix?"

Hearing him say it out loud filled her with joy. It was exactly what she needed from him. The memories were still there, they just required a little jog every now and again to release them.

"That's right. You were brought out of your Sentient world and into this one. This machine can do that. It should be able to find someone in your world too. Something called an—"

"An Overseer, yes," Luke interrupted. More than a few of his missing memories had begun to reappear. "The Overseer can see into my world."

"Awesome, you remember." She struggled to think of where to go next, he had overtaken her thought process already. It took her a few seconds to find her place again before she could continue. When she did, she knew there

was no point in delaying any further, she needed him to try and fix it. "Take a look at this for me."

Around the other side, the small panel beneath the tower's control console had been shut. But she had seen enough of it to know it would not take much to change that. With a swift kick, it flipped open to reveal the dead internals of the system. Inside, it appeared a mess of wires similar to the ones that still glowed on the side of Luke's head, in the unsealed black box. The technology had to work in the same sort of way. What that was remained a mystery to her. She hoped that was not the same for her friend.

Luke dropped unsteadily to his knee and studied the wiring. All the while he wobbled and swayed from side to side, as he tried his best to stabilise. Phoenix lowered herself to the same level and steadied him with her hand. She had enough balance to share.

"This device is deactivated," he said.

"That's the reason I needed you to see it, Luke." *Crap, don't use his real name, he hasn't remembered it yet!* She thought a second after saying it. "Do you think you'd be able to get it working again?" she said, moving things quickly on.

He stayed silent. His eyes had already begun to work on the device. The rest of him was hesitant to join in for some reason. Had the name sounded familiar to him?

"Hey, you OK? Can you fix this?" She leant down to see the rest of his face.

With his concentration suddenly broken, he flinched and then settled his gaze upon her. This close she could not get away from the awful stench of his clothing and on his breath. The guy was in a bad way and getting worse all the time. She could hardly leave him like this, both Luke and the human he inhabited deserved better.

"I believe I can bring this device back online," he said. "As far as I can see, it hasn't blown or become damaged, it just lacks power. I suspect whoever deactivated it simply

cut the physical connections. They must have been in a panic to leave the Conduit in this way.”

“Back at Sanctuary I saw another structure made from the same stuff as the tower, going away from the area, in the direction of the city. This has to go through the ground to that.”

“You are correct, Phoenix. In order to reconnect this device I will need to reattach the severed connections. That will take time and require some equipment. May I write a list for you?”

She had been waiting for words of that effect since they began talking. The last time he gave them a list of what he needed, they had made great leaps in her search for Graham. If he could do even more this time, she was certain they would eventually get there.

“Sure,” she replied with a gentle pat on his back. “Whatever you need—” She stopped short of saying his name again.

“Excellent.”

They finished with a smile each, exchanged between them for very different reasons; his was through politeness, whereas hers was another symptom of her growing guilt. Was she asking too much of him, or at least of Jack’s body? He did not appear to have slept much at all in the interim. Not much of a surprise, if his dreams were filled with the same terrors she had seen in his short memory clips.

After returning to her feet, Phoenix watched as Luke began to very carefully tease the wires inside the console apart. He was content enough to do so in silence while he concentrated wholly on his task of bringing it back to life. When he found something of interest, he made a note of it on a wrist computer Rhys had given him. His list was growing at a rapid rate. The job he faced was going to need some heavy duty tools, if he was planning on digging down through the floor.

Whatever he needed, she was going to get him.

She noted to herself that once again he had neglected to tend to himself first, even though he sorely needed to. Anything would have helped. A bowl of water and a handful of soap at the very least. Phoenix decided it was to be her next task. There had to be a working tap somewhere in the building. After sending Matt out to get the correct supplies – he would go whether he wanted to or not – she would see to cleaning Luke up a little. She had done the same for her brothers on countless occasions. Her years looking after them had left her unable to ignore someone so vulnerable.

For that reason she had something she wanted added to the list too; antibiotics. If his wound had become infected, he would need them most urgently of all. Jack had told her how Luke struggled to understand the feedback of his body. If that was true then he probably had no idea how to process the signals he was receiving. Could he even tell if he was in pain or not? The body he inhabited was like a ticking time bomb, waiting to go off at any moment. If it did, it would leave an innocent human hanging on for dear life.

All she could do for the time being was wait for the list to be compiled. Once Luke had done that, she would help him get started. They really were going to get a chance to find Graham after all.

\* \* \*

Preparations had now come to an end and the time had arrived for Graham and Alex to lead the mass exodus of Sentients to safety. For the most part it was to be a speedy dash out of cover and on through the battlefield. Unfortunately, none of them could even hazard a guess at how the enemy was going to react to their escape attempt. Kindness had to have a good idea, but he was choosing not to share it with everyone.

That did not fill Graham with much hope.

A plan had been put forward to the other Sentients inside their hidden space, and so far it appeared to have gone accordingly. Everything that could be done to ready them for what was to come had been done. That left only the unknown standing between failure and success. Whatever the enemy were to throw at them in the last desperate moments of their escape, for them to overcome it they needed no less than a miracle.

Graham, Alex and Stephen stood beside Kindness and the other Sentients as they went through the plan one last time. Everyone was required to follow it exactly. All except Graham and Alex, who were one of the largest unknowns still facing their trip. No-one could say for sure whether the two were capable of doing what was needed.

"So," Graham said, his hands leaning on the table in front of them. The overview of the proposed escape was strewn across it like old fashioned paper war plans. "While Alex and I are at the front and guiding the group, the main Sentient force will be at the rear, ready for the enemy to begin its attack?"

"Indeed," Kindness replied.

"Well, then, who's going to protect the sides?"

"The front and rear will be the most vulnerable to attack, so we will maintain a higher level of readiness there. The sides will be protected by force-fields. The injured cannot fight directly, instead they will combine their energy to assist in maintaining this protective barrier. Our job is to keep the enemy away from them."

"So, who'll protect us at the front?"

Kindness leaned in closer to the table to see Graham and spoke with a tone of concern. "You will, Graham Denehey."

"You're kidding?"

"I am not. You possess the ability to create a force field yourself. Use that ability to keep the enemy at bay. Alex will be able to help while she is leading us too."

"And what of our route?" Another of the nearby Sentients asked of his leader.

Kindness turned his luminous head to Alex for the answer to this question.

"There are two choices," she said, stepping forward. Being so little had almost become irrelevant, until she reached the table. She could not quite make it up onto it. Graham saw her trying and did as he always did in this situation; he picked his daughter up and gently set her down with her legs dangling over the side of the table. While she described each of the routes, she playfully swung her legs. "The first is the longer of the two. It would take us back the way we came, to Sanctuary, and then through to the puzzle maze."

"And the second?" Graham said.

"Well, that one would be much, much quicker. The problem is that even though it would take us directly to the puzzle maze, it would also take us dangerously close to the enemy's central spire."

"So we take the longer path."

"There is one problem with the longer route though," Alex said as she began to search the paperwork on the table. "Here. This part is really narrow. It would be the perfect place to trap us, if the enemy is able to get ahead."

Kindness took the small map from Alex and held it up for closer inspection. It showed the layout of Sanctuary, and more importantly the single-file corridors within.

"Being, as it will be, almost twice as long a distance as the second route, there is another issue too," he said, turning their attention to the many Sentients still suffering from their injury. "I fear they will not be able to maintain their protective barrier for such a long time. What they will create will be strong, but not for as long as we would need."

"You're crazy, you want to take us that close to Isaac's centre tower thing?" Graham said.



“Hang on a second, Graham.” Stephen moved out of the edge of the group and took his place beside the others. He too began to pick at the scattered remains of the plan. “Don’t forget, this will be the last thing Isaac’s forces will be expecting us to do. With that in mind we could make it most of the way, possibly even past this area here,” he pointed on his chosen map for the others to see, “before they even realise what’s happening.”

Graham could not argue with Stephen’s logic there, he had clearly thought it through. It still had no effect on the sense of impending doom Graham had begun to feel. There was no more room for doubt, but still he was not as confident as the rest of them. Not even Alex appeared to see the black cloud of insecurity hanging above their human companion.

The time had come for him to commit without another moment’s hesitation. With him were beings about to take their last chance of survival. They did not need him becoming a problem along the way. After all, if they failed, he would be torn apart just as they would be. Nothing could go wrong from this point on.

“Are we agreed then?” Stephen said, looking around the table for the confirmations from each. He received a resounding ‘yes’ from the group before finally landing on Graham again. “Graham? Well?”

An image of his family popped to the front of his mind as he stared ahead at the messy table. He could see Jane and Alex sitting on the beach with two oversized ice-cream cones dripping white goo down the sides. It was one he often thought of when realising just how lucky a person he was. The memory had the weight behind it that he needed to push him into action. That single image had enough power over him to make his mind up once and for all.

He wanted more than anything in the world to see them again. There were so many new memories waiting to

be made between them all. He could not bear the thought of missing out on any of them.

"I'm in," he said after a worrying moment of silence.

Alex sat staring at him with a large smile and a slight twinkle in her eyes. It became clear to him how such a vivid memory could have come out of nowhere like it had; she had guided him to it. He understood the message and her reasons for tampering with his mind, but he could not exactly agree with her method though. If they made it to safety he really needed to ask her not to do such a thing again, it was a little rude.

"Excellent," Kindness said as the group dispersed. He clapped his hands together, removing the table and all of its loose paperwork in a flash. He then looked to his people and spoke with his booming voice again, calling out like a megaphone at full volume. "Get ready to leave. We move in ten minutes!"

## Chapter 22

### Who goes there?

*10pm, Friday: 2 hours until Switchover*

**T**ime alone had given Conrad a chance to gather his evidence together in one convenient – albeit imaginary – place in his mind. With his eyes closed he could see it all hovering in front of his eyes, just like it did in his beloved holographic evidence room. It helped calm him down a little to imagine more friendly surroundings rather than the empty room.

The last time he had seen the Mayor, neither of them had been in a very chatty mood. Mayor Crawley's injuries were bad, but not quite as bad as Conrad had expected. It appeared their kidnappers had a limit on the damage they were to cause him. Despite the specks of blood where the Mayor had last sat, he had only suffered a broken finger and a face full of bruises. His change in mood had come about for another reason.

Conrad only hoped that did not mean he had told them what they needed. If he had, their time there would be cut short – their lives too. It had now been well over an hour since Mayor Crawley had returned this time.

So was he chatting to the enemy?

An ache in Conrad's left leg forced him to stretch it out in front of him. With the remains of the chair no more than pieces of kindling upon the floor, he had been left with only

the concrete to rest on. What he would give for a cushion. It was a quick reminder of exactly where he had ended up. His imaginary evidence room could wait while he tried to find a comfortable position.

After a minute or so of shuffling in place to relieve the cramp in his body, he finally stopped and attempted to return to his thoughts again. His concentration had escaped him for the time being. He was not getting anywhere anyway. All he had managed to come up with so far involved nothing more than a crazy conspiracy theory. Could the Mayor know more than he let on?

He felt his limbs tense the instant a footstep echoed down the hall toward his cell. The threat of his turn being soon had reverberated around inside his skull each time they had come back. This time was no different. He would not help them take him. If they wanted him, they would have to drag him the entire way.

The footsteps stopped just outside his cell.

"Step away from the door," the person on the other side said. His words were muffled, so Conrad knew he wore a mask like the others. Keeping their identities a secret seemed a tad pointless to him; they were going to kill their captives afterwards anyway, so why bother? "If you're going to try anything, know that I've got a Taser pistol on me this time."

*Then get ready to use it, buddy,* Conrad thought.

The door opened much slower than the last few times. They were expecting another fight. Little did they know Conrad had neither the strength nor interest in another round with them. He welcomed a knockout shot from the Taser though. It would make the job of sliding him along the floor much easier for them and a lot more comfortable for him too.

"Get up," the masked man ordered.

Conrad ignored him and continued to face the far wall. The man then kicked him from behind, the thick boot

digging a sore rib.

*How you gonna play this one then, buddy boy!*

"Look, *Conrad*, we only want to talk to you, OK, that's all."

"I don't know anything."

"We believe you."

*Bravo, you've got my attention*, Conrad thought as he slowly turned to face the man. He was not expected that as a reply.

"Good," the man continued. "Now, if you'll follow me." He stepped aside and allowed Conrad the room to pass him by.

For a short while he considered staying in place, just to see if the guy would turn nasty. But there was something to his tone that had Conrad wondering. Pushing his luck too far, he could possibly end his chances of discovering the enemy's motive. They were not acting on random impulses, he knew that much. There was a plan behind their actions, one he had not even found a hint of so far.

He deliberated after standing and focused on the scuffs on the floor. His previous attempt at causing them trouble had failed miserably and quickly. It was not worth bothering again. Through this train of thought he came to a decision soon after and walked to the door. He would keep the man in front of him at all times, to guarantee no chance of taking him unawares.

"That way," the man said, pointing down the dark hallway. Even in here the windows were covered.

Without his wrist computer Conrad could not tell the time of day, only that it had to be night by then.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked as they walked. Despite the awkwardness, he kept his head looking to the side to keep the man in view.

"Just keep going."

At the end of the hall and through an open door was another dark room. This one appeared much larger than his cramped cell, but no more welcoming to be led into. It had

little to no lighting, only enough to highlight an empty chair – from the same set as the one Conrad had used earlier – sitting in the centre.

“Inside,” the man said, nudging his prisoner ahead.

Conrad looked to him again. “What’s going on?”

“Sit in the chair and wait. The questions will begin once you are comfortable.”

Without much of a choice left, he entered and head into the middle of the room. He was plunged into almost total darkness as soon as the door closed behind him. His direction of travel took him to the chair in the sudden blackout, which he found with the edge of his shin.

*Dammit!*

He felt his way to the front of the chair and, remembering the small amount he could about his own station’s set up, turned to where he believed the one-way mirror was located. The convenience of having chosen an old and abandoned police station worked for both sides.

“Anyone there,” he said, staring into his own dim reflection.

A crackle from the speakers in each corner of the room made him step away. “Sit down,” the highly distorted voice said. *Again with this?* he thought. His enemy were once again going through the redundant process of hiding their identity.

“Who are you?”

“I said sit down, Mr. Robinson.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll sit.”

The lights came on as soon as he parked himself on the wooden chair. They were too bright at first, causing him to wince and cover his eyes with his hand. After a few seconds he could see again, although not as well as he would like. It was a routine tactic when interrogating someone, he knew from his days on the other side of the mirror.

“Where’s Mayor Crawley?”

The voice was low, more like an extended burp in tone. "We ask the questions. You answer them, understood?"

"Bullshit, where is he? You don't honestly believe no-one will come looking for him, do you?"

"Quiet! Now, shall I continue?"

Conrad nodded. He never expected they would explain themselves straight away. Instead he was ready to learn what he could from their questions. They would have to reveal something to him at some point. How could they ask him their questions without doing so?

"Your name is Conrad Robinson," the questioner continued with. "Your wife's name was Gloria, your two daughters are Samantha and Ellen. Your wife died October, 21st, 2054."

"What's your point?" Conrad said, interrupting the summary of his own life. That they knew anything about him at all had him gripping his seat. It was another tool he sometimes used on some of the criminals he had questioned. It sent a strong message, *'you can't hide anything from me'*.

"You were born in Jamaica in 2001, then moved to the UK in 2007. You were six years old at the time. In 2020, aged nineteen, you joined the police force. Your current rank is Detective Chief Inspector. Your current partner is a Joe Willis. We have everything Mr. Robinson; your school records, tax code, pension details, everything. Shall I go on in more detail?"

"No, I get it."

"Then you understand there is nothing you could possibly hide from us."

*What about my lottery numbers, dickhead?!* "I do," Conrad answered.

"Good. Now, tell me what you know about us."

After releasing his tight grip of the seat, Conrad replied. "Nothing specific."

"Go on."

"I've been investigating a spate of murders across the city, all with the same MO. That led me here. What more can I say?"

"Perhaps you could tell me how it led you here."

"Sure, why not. Well, at the last dump site – nice job by the way – we found a body that hadn't been mutilated like the others; those holes you seem to enjoy cutting out of your victims' skulls, you know the ones."

"Do not push me, Conrad," the man growled.

"I'm not. We got a name and a last known, so we took a look. That's when we found another of yours; strangulation this time and left on the kitchen counter. From there we found you."

"Really? So you didn't find an encrypted data coin in the apartment too?"

"Possibly. Does it matter?"

"It does. Who else knows about it?"

*Is that what you wanted to know all this time, who saw the data coin?* Conrad thought to himself. That cleared the Mayor at least, he had not been told about it.

"What if I said no-one, would that make you happy?" he said. "Of course I could be lying. Maybe I've told my entire department already."

"And what about Mayor Crawley, does he know about it?"

"I didn't show it to him. You've beaten him for nothing, he hasn't a clue. But I do. You couldn't hide your plans from me, you bastards. Tell me, why take the Mayor at all? He's done nothing."

He received no reply this time, no snide comment or threat either, just silence. Conrad found himself surrounded by his own thoughts again. It still made little sense to him, despite his assured answers to their questions. He was unable to pick out the real issue. The data coin was important, but exactly why remained unclear. The information stored on it was useless now they had



completed their kidnapping. Unless it was not the police they feared would access it.

Considering this gave him a slight fright; had he missed something obvious all along, another faction perhaps?

"You took the Mayor," he began, thinking aloud, "because you believed he knew something about you. I found the data coin, which led me to finding out about your plan to grab him. So why take me? I'm the one that shouldn't really be here. You'd only do that if you thought I was helping the Mayor in some way." He lowered his voice before finishing his thought. "What does he know that I don't?"

Everything appeared confused in his mind. Things were just not adding up anymore, they were spinning around in a whirlwind of evidence, like a tornado had torn through it all. The killer-cult had him and the Mayor, but they needed something from them. They were asking about the data coin, yet they did not appear interested in the case surrounding their little group. Nothing was going the way Conrad had expected.

"You're not asking me about the data coin because of what's on it, are you? You're trying to find out if I know what you think the Mayor does. Who are you people?" he asked the speaker in the corner of the room.

"What do you know about your Mayor, Conrad?" The questioner said, his reply startling Conrad a little.

"Enough that I wasn't going to vote for him in the next election."

"Do you know how he came to be the Mayor?"

"I don't follow politics that closely."

"But you work for him."

"What?"

"You follow his orders. Do you deny that you and the Mayor have colluded to hide the truth?"

The insult brought Conrad to his feet in protest. "Of course I deny it, it's bullshit!"

"Then why have you covered up these murders? People have been killed, yet you've made no arrests, told no-one outside your office and kept witnesses silent? All by order of Mayor Crawley, why?"

"I... That wasn't my fault. I've tried my best to catch you out, to stop you."

"Conrad," the voice called through the speakers to him, bringing his enthused defence to a swift end. "We are not the killers!"

Conrad froze mid breath as it slowly sunk in. He had it all wrong after all. So who were these people then, if not the killer-cult?

"I don't understand. The information on the data coin, it came from one of your people. We found your dead-drop too. For Christ's sake, I've been tracking you down since finding Oliver's body in the warehouse. I know you're part of it."

The conversation ended suddenly, broken off by another loud crackle from the speakers. Conrad sat and leaned forward on his knees. It was hopeless. The whole ordeal was beginning to feel like a huge screw-up to him. There was far more going on than he could explain. His own evidence explained none of this.

Sitting and expecting a reply through the intercom, Conrad almost failed to notice when the lock on the door to his side slid open. The door then swung in just enough to allow him to see through the gap. Another guard stood outside, his body casting a shadow across the open doorway.

"What's happening?" Conrad asked.

"Bring him through to me," the deep voice ordered of the masked accomplice.

\* \* \*

*10:30pm, Friday: 90 minutes until Switchover*

The past hour-and-a-half had been almost totally devoid of conversation between Phoenix and Luke. Few words were wasted when they had spoken. If one needed a certain tool the other had gotten it without any unnecessary chatting. They had worked without break and were not going to stop any time soon. Not until the Conduit was up and running.

Phoenix had managed to see to cleaning up her friend, but even that had been done during the repairs. After a quick splash over with warm water, she had checked on his wound. The redness surrounding the area of his injury had told a grim story; it was infected after all. After a quick change of the dressing, she had jabbed him with an antibiotic pen, bought by Matt from one of their more discreet drug dealers.

Out of all of the things on the list, finding someone who supplied illegally obtained or knock-off pharmaceuticals had proved the most difficult. Thankfully they had quickly gathered together everything required and were making good progress in the repairs of the Conduit device.

With the floor panels around the left side of the room-sized tower pulled up and discarded, it revealed the true extent of Isaac's incursion into the real world. They could not reach all the way down to the enormous, crystal tendrils that had worked through the ground to the city. That remained out of their reach, despite the large amount of already broken concrete they had removed. The tower had shattered and cracked it enough to leave it loose, and in a fairly neat circle. What they could reach still had everything they needed to complete their plan.

Luke sat with his legs dangling over the edge of their little hole beside the tower. He could not get himself down to the bottom in the state of exhaustion he was in. It had fallen to Phoenix to tell him not to push himself too much.

Judging his weakness was something he just could not get to grips with, so she had jumped into the hole for him.

"What next?" she asked, before passing up a small section of the towers glass-like casing. Her tatty red jumper had quickly caused her body to overheat, so she had removed it and tied it around her waist. Now her father's t-shirt could be seen and the big letters on it, spelling out her father's favourite band: Pearl Jam.

After taking the glassy panel from her and sliding it across the floor, Luke then arched forward with his arms across his knees and peered through the gap they had cut out with a handheld plasma cutter – also bought illegally on the black-market. A sudden lurch forward had Phoenix ready to grab him and push him back. Luckily he found his balance in time.

"Can you see any wire clusters, just inside, perhaps behind another transparent layer?"

She dropped the goggles she had worn while using the plasma cutter and ducked her head a little to see inside the tower. There was even less light now that their work had ventured beneath the floor, so she could barely really make out anything but the hole she had just cut out of it.

"Chuck down a torch for me."

"Certainly," Luke replied, polite as always.

It was only small, but to her delight it had done enough to help. At no more than her arm's length inside there was indeed a large cluster of wires. They were the same as the glowing type the Sentients appeared to prefer, except these remained dark for the time being. They had also been severed and left hanging.

"OK, I see them. Now what?" Phoenix said, rubbing sweat out of her eyes. Her t-shirt had become drenched already, it could scarcely hold any more moisture. "We can't connect them all, there's got to be thousands in there."

"We will not have to, Phoenix. With the correct signals they should reform their connections automatically.

Remember, Sentient technology does not follow the same rules as yours must. Here, take this."

Phoenix was handed a bundle of wires, around six in total, each with metal clips to attach to more. She untangled them as the process was explained to her.

"If you could place these on a few of the wires, I will try and activate the repair protocols. The device will be told to reconnect itself and await our input."

"Our input?" Phoenix asked, her left eyebrow trying its hardest to escape her face.

"We will require someone to replace the previous Overseer. For you to find your friend inside the Sentient world, it will have to be you who takes that role. No-one else can search for him, they haven't a black box."

While the idea of her taking the place of the Overseer slowly sank in, she began to connect the wires. She was not required to think for this part, so her mind fixated on the next. Entering the Sentient world was crazy. Then she realised, there was something else she would have to make herself do before that would be possible.

A thought had occurred to her and she had to ask the question. She handed over the wires as she asked it. Despite the ongoing conversation, they had not missed a beat with the repairs. They were working on autopilot by now.

"Have I got to get inside the tower like the last person?" she asked.

The idea of locking herself inside a room no bigger than a broom cupboard, made of crystal no less, was almost as hard to agree to as entering the Sentient world itself. The plan was getting worse for her at each stage. Next she expected he would tell her to run repeatedly into the wall for it to work; it felt as counter-productive as the last two suggestions to her.

"The Overseer is part of the device, Phoenix. For it to work you will have to be inside it, yes."

“Crap. Someone died in there. The blood’s probably still wet too.”

Six loose wires draped over the edge of the hole and disappeared inside the tower beside her. For the moment her assistance was on hold while she watched Luke dealing with the other end of his tangle of connections. Once he pulled one free, he set about attaching it to the device he would use to tap into the Sentient tower’s data processing stream. This was nothing as mundane as a wrist computer, but as complex as the black box on the side of his head. The wire clicked as it made contact with the inside of the device, which imparted a small kick of energy to his head in response.

Seeing him adding the other wires in turn to the box brought a sudden realisation to her. She was not that different from the Sentient sitting a few feet away. They both had a black box device hanging from their temples like odd pieces of jewellery. They also shared the same aim. Luke was undoubtedly as eager to find Graham as she was. He had started it all for her in the first place, something she could now appreciate fully. All the time wasted on her suspicions – caused by her unwillingness to trust people – had been for nothing.

They were allies, and only now could she really see that he always had been. Regardless of the change of appearance, it was still Luke inside. While he closed his eyes and silently communicated with the tower, she found herself unable to take her eyes off of him.

“There, I have it!” he said, with all the sudden energy of a disturbed sleeper. The eyes said he was awake, yet his body remained slumped. “I am now inside the system.”

“What should I do?”

“One moment please. Searching... searching... got it.”

A faint creaking sound began emanating from inside the hole to Phoenix’s side. She turned to it and was surprised to see the other ends of the wires, hidden until then, growing

out of the crystal beneath. They wormed their way up to their severed ends, seeking them out in slow arcs from side to side. When they met the correct end, they instantly fused together, forming one unbroken – and more importantly – glowing wire. Thousands of complete connections were made before her eyes. Each time she blinked, she missed hundreds at a time.

“Shit, you did it,” she yelled, as the rest of the tower began to flicker back to life.

Within seconds the room was flooded with its light, finally killing off the remaining shadows at the edges. The tower then started to hum as the incoming energy set about rebooting the device. They had reanimated the dead.

Phoenix exited the hole, disregarded the dirt smeared all over her clothing and skin, then headed over to the console connected to the tower. The screen was alive and waiting for them to begin the next phase of their plan. Only she had no idea how it was to be activated. That would again be down to Luke to work out.

“It’s working,” she called out in excitement.

“Excellent,” Luke replied, while disconnecting his own connections to the system. He let the wires fall back into the hole, then swung his legs around and joined her at the console – though not before another battle with his unsteady balance. “We should not waste a moment more.”

This was the part she feared the most; she was expected to step inside the brightly lit tower. If she was going to do this, she wanted more support first. Luke had no notion of human fear, so he was hardly going to do. She had never really needed anyone in the past, but that was not the case anymore.

Rhys was becoming something of a habit for her.

“What are you doing?” Luke asked after spotting her activating a call on her wrist computer.

After trying her best to wipe the built up muck from her screen, she replied. “There are some things you’ll never

understand, I'm afraid. This is one of those things."

Whether she meant support or her growing fondness of Rhys, she was not entirely sure herself. All that mattered was that she needed him there. When he answered, she felt a warmth return to her core that had been missing a moment earlier.

"You OK?" he asked before she said a word.

"I'm fine. We're ready to start down here."

"Awesome. I'll be down in a second. Don't start without me," he replied, then turned his head to the side to speak again. "Matt, keep an eye on these two for me. If either on them move, you have my permission to shoot."

"Everything alright up there?" Phoenix said.

Rhys faced the camera and smiled. "We're great. It's like a party up here. Our new friends are still rather chatty. So what's the plan?"

She felt a smile of her own creep onto her face.

"Next, I go in."



## Chapter 23

### A walk in the park?

**T**he moment Graham dreaded had now arrived. They were seconds away from collapsing the hidden world the Sentients had been hiding in. Behind this lay the barren ruins of their former land; the last thing standing between them and the safety of the puzzle maze. Along the chosen route, they were going to head directly toward the enemy in the hopes of sneaking beneath their radar. Speed and stealth were to be their only weapons.

With Graham and Alex at the front, and Stephen staying back to help the injured with their protective force field when the time came, the stage was set for their big escape. They were organised into position by Kindness, the general to this Sentient army. His word alone would bring down the cover to reveal the darkness beyond.

"Are we ready?" he called out to his people. "Remember your positions at all times. We move out on my command."

Their leader would be where he was needed the most; namely wherever the group's weakest point resided at any given moment. After a uniformed reply from his troops, Kindness turned to Graham and Alex, and gave them the signal they were readying themselves for. He raised his arm, kept it there for a few seconds and then dropped it to his side.

"Go! Collapse the walls now."

A sudden gust of air burst in from the outside the moment the walls vanished. It pushed down upon their small group like a crashing wave, forcing them into a shrunken formation. There was no time to check everyone over, they had to go regardless of their readiness. Graham and Alex set off immediately after regaining their footing, with the others behind left no option but to follow closely.

The dark sky above hovered ominously over their tiny battalion as they slowly moved off, its distant lightning striking the surface like a vengeful god venting its anger at their disobedience. Each time a new bolt lit up the sky the group stuttered and broke up. The injured were unable to hold themselves tightly together. They were not going to survive any attack in this state of disorder.

"Everyone, close in. We cannot lose cohesion," Kindness ordered of the middle formation. "Protect the rear."

Graham could hear the plan threatening to unravel from his position at the front. The world they entered was an unforgiving place, with little care for those who lived within. It had dealt the first merciful blow as if to warn them back into hiding. They unfortunately had no such option.

While the rest of the Sentients reformed their tight net, the journey became clear to those at the front. It was a vast void, where only the occasional black hill broke up the endlessness. Nothing around them could be used to judge distance at all, all the way to the glowing red horizon. How Alex could tell one place from another was beyond Graham, it all looked identical. A land of death and decay the likes of which his nightmares could never match.

What made it worse was the knowledge that their route was taking them in the other direction of Sanctuary. There would be no stop along the way, no place to rest before taking on the remainder of the journey. This was all that lay ahead of them now.

The element of surprise was with them. As they quietly began to walk in synch, it dawned on Graham that they had

made it out without meeting a single enemy. This was not expected to last for long. He looked back to the huddled group of injured Sentients walking behind him and felt his heart stumble for a quick beat. Of the ones who could walk, only a small amount of them were doing so unaided. Most had paired up with another to support their ungainly gait.

Alex had dictated their pace from the moment they set off. She did not slow at all, not even for the others to catch up. They would not have the luxury of progressing at their own speed. If the group were caught and trapped by an incoming enemy patrol of more than one, it would be over in minutes. The path ahead needed to be covered as quickly as possible, they could not allow the pace to be slowed for a second. Although for someone with such small legs, she had shown no signs of struggling as Graham had expected. In contrast, she appeared the strongest of them all.

"How far will we have to travel before we'll see the enemy's tower thing?" Graham asked, searching the distant horizon for a clue.

"It should start to appear just as we reach the last hill before the horizon," she replied.

"Are you sure this is definitely the way?"

"I am, Graham. This world contains many interconnected tunnels, or shortcuts as you would call them. They allow us Sentients to travel instantaneously between the many different levels. To reach the puzzle maze we need to find the one that can take us to that same area. That currently sits on the other side of this land, just past the enemy."

"Do you think we'll be able to fight off those creatures if we meet one?" he said, followed by a paranoid look around.

"It is not a question of 'if we meet one', Graham, but when. They are out here, make no mistake of that. The further we can get before they find us, the greater chance we will have at fending them off."

For the rest of their journey he knew he would be talking to the real Sentient behind the mask of his daughter. There

was too much riding on this last attempt at survival for anything to get in the way, even the imitation. It did not stop him missing it though.

A call from the back of the group brought Graham's attention around 180 degrees. It was Kindness once again reminding his people to stay together. The injured line had become stretched and inflated, more so than Stephen could cope with. If they did the same during an attack they would not take much of a beating before crumbling altogether. Their force field had not yet been required and already they were facing a problem. What they failed to manage would ultimately fall to the others to do instead.

An uncertain countdown had begun as the group slowly progressed. The landscape remained unchanged for another two of the small hills – or crests of dirt. The ground was still loose and covered by a thin coating that crunched underfoot. It was the quiet and last resting place of most of the Sentient army. They had fallen in place, their remains scattered across the land like an invading beach upon a grassy hill.

Knowing this, Graham had found it hard not to tread lightly, for fear of disturbing the dead. It proved impossible from the very start of their journey, yet he kept at it. He avoided particular areas of dark ground as he walked alongside his daughter. In his mind these were the shadows of the murdered Sentient soldiers, a scorch-mark staining the floor where a life had been extinguished.

Their war had been a bloody and ruthless one.

The entire formation had again decided to take solace in the quietness now afforded them. They walked along their chosen escape route, with the very real chance of their end arriving over the next hill, unannounced and utterly terrifying. A sense of expectant dread had flourished among them all, which hushed their voices and distracted their minds. They walked the walk of the dead, shuffling along as though stalking the living.

At the first sign of trouble the entire battalion were to react in the most defensive way they could, by activating a joint force field. That moment arrived as quickly as the lightning bolts that struck the ground a few miles away. Their distant glimmer of the enemy had brought them all to a sudden stop as they assessed the danger level.

"Has it seen us?" Graham whispered to Alex, who kept her hawk-like eyes on the creature unknowingly crossing their path.

She lowered herself to her knees, then placed a finger over her lips. At her insistence the rest of them copied her actions and dropped to the floor, after the message had ventured automatically to the back. Stealth was still their best option, and that suited Graham down to the ground he knelt upon. He, Alex, and a small collection of other Sentients were all that made up the front fighting force. If the creature spotted them, it would be only seconds before he would find himself amid a tiny war-zone.

"It's moving away," Alex said.

To their shared relief the creature had continued along its predestined route as it patrolled the area. So far they had made it out of sight of their original location and were soon expecting to see the tip of the enemy's tower poking out above the blood-red horizon. The fact that they had only just found their first enemy, after a few miles of walking, suggested that Isaac's patrols were less frequent than they had originally thought.

Where were they all?

"Is it normally this quiet out here?" Graham said, as a chilly breeze brushed past him.

"Not this quiet, no," she answered. "Since we went into hiding we've lost track of the enemy's movements. However, they are usually around somewhere close by."

"I'm obviously happy if they stay away and all, but where could they all be?"

“I suspect they may have been busy with whatever your friend Luke found out about. Let’s just hope it stays that way while we’re out here.”

Graham could not agree more with that statement. The last thing he wanted to see was a shit-load of the creatures racing toward them, like a herd of enraged elephants. Of course, waiting for them to appear was bad enough. It had him reacting to the smallest of nearby disturbances as they once again set off.

They continued at a slightly faster pace in response to the sighting of an enemy patrol. By now they had been travelling for long enough to have become more attuned to those nearest. They were a well-oiled engine purring at idle speed, yet to be pushed into gear. This was as they needed their group to operate. After the chaos at the beginning of their journey, this was a huge burden removed from Kindness’ shoulders, judging by the almost relaxed nature of his movements.

“Alex,” Kindness said, from halfway back along the group. “Do you see any more problems ahead of us?”

She spun around and began walking backwards as she answered. “No. I think we’ve caught them out by leaving so suddenly.”

“Excellent. Perhaps we could stop to allow the injured to rest a little? Some are complaining of tiredness.”

The request prompted Alex to begin kicking the dirt with her foot while she considered it. Graham could see it had her weighing up the options, but unable to decide. She had made it abundantly clear at the start that this quicker route would leave them more vulnerable to any attack. By taking a break they were risking being discovered by a random patrol. Then again, by pushing forward without a rest, there was the worry that they would be pushing their injured too hard. Neither choice was without a degree of chance to succeed too.

“Hey,” Graham said gently, taking her to one side to speak. “Would it put us in that much more danger to stop for a few minutes? We’ve managed this far without alerting the enemy, we could rest for a little, couldn’t we?”

“Fine,” she reluctantly replied, before nodding her agreement to Kindness, waiting by the injured line of Sentients.

Within a relatively short amount of time, she had almost taken command of the group. Her guidance was leading them to safety and it appeared not even Kindness himself was about to question the arrangement. It was yet another part of the Sentient hidden beneath the outside image of his daughter that he had found peeking out. She had the authority of a leader, or at least a strong will that could make one.

“You never told me what you did during the war,” Graham said, taking advantage of the break. The fear that she would shut him out had only been slight, but it had been enough to alter his tone a little. He asked as though in passing.

While the others took a moment to sit and tend to the needs of their hurt, Alex and Graham stood staring across the open land in silence. His question had not brought about an immediate answer from her. Instead it was left hovering in the air just waiting to be popped.

Eventually she answered, her voice lowered and filled with regret.

“I was unable to do much,” she said. “When the war first began, I was with many others. We were overrun by a dark cloud that consumed those unfortunate enough to be caught in its wake. It burnt them to dust, vaporising their very essence. All I could do to get away was to hide among the dead remains of the victims. Those it didn’t consume entirely were left deformed and scattered about the place. I was sure I would die there surrounded by death.”

“What did you do to get away?”

"I didn't, Graham. I stayed there for what must have been days. I was too scared to move, so I remained in place until the clouds had cleared. After seeing thousands of my own kind slaughtered by the enemy, I had no choice but to run. I've never fought one of these things before, Graham. This is my chance to make up for that failure to act before. I will not give up without a fight this time."

"You couldn't have done anything to stop Isaac back then, Alex. You failed no-one. The survival of your people is all that matters now. Whatever it takes to achieve that, I know you'll be able to do. You shouldn't feel ashamed for not fighting in the beginning. If you had, you would never have found me. I won't forget what you've done for me. Never. Do you understand?"

She smiled, keeping her eyes scanning the distance at the same time.

"I understand, Graham. Thank you," she said.

What he had already seen of that time had put the fear of God into him. He experienced the terror first hand as though he had been there the first time. Running amid a crowd of panicking Sentients, all fleeing for their lives, had left an imprint of horror on his soul. He could think of nothing more horrendous for a being to endure. Yet somehow this tiny little girl had made it through. She was the real success of her races' survival attempt.

For a few minutes more they watched as the horizon flickered its threatening hue. The silence had made way for a few hushed conversations to break out among the group. They were by no means relaxed, just less worried than before. It was a peaceful time.

It was also a time ripe for the enemy to stage its first attack.

None of them saw it coming until it was right on top of them. One single creature had pounced from the darkness, the sharp teeth of its raging armoury gnashing at the air as it drew near. Graham was unaware anything had changed



at all, then he heard the first ripple of energy fire at the rear. He snapped around to see the Sentients holding that area, erupting to life with a ferocity only matched by the enemy itself.

Their energy had begun to burst free of their bodies in a steady stream of bright, voluminous light, which tore into the creature. They were too much for this one enemy. While he looked on, the small team of Sentients surrounded the creature until it could go nowhere. It had no escape. Eventually it began to break apart in a fit of sparks and flashes, until it was nothing but litter upon the ground.

But they had made far too much noise in the process.

"They've killed it!" Graham said, suddenly compelled to clap in response. His excitement was met with silence from his fellow escapees. The attack meant something very different to the rest of them.

"We have to move, now!" Alex ordered.

"But they killed it, Alex. We're fine."

"No, Graham, we are not. We have been discovered. More will come."

Kindness was next to begin calling out the orders.

"On your feet. Be ready to form the barrier. Remember, the force field we are about to create will be all that keeps us safe. Stay together and stay strong."

Everyone took a solid stance in their agreed positions, while the strongest of their fighters began to link up arms with the Sentient next to them. Within a short amount of time they had formed a circle around the entire group. Graham was not sure what he was about to see, only that this would somehow form a protective barrier around them.

"Begin," Kindness shouted.

Gradually the Sentients that made up the surrounding circle started to shimmer and wobble, as if fading away into water. Then from their feet up, the process spread all the way to their heads. At first the floor glowed as the outlines of the beings standing there lost the defined shape of

before. When the energy contained within each began to merge, it slowly expanded to engulf them all. The whole force field was made up of the Sentient fighters, their stored life-forces providing the required power to create it.

Graham watched in astonishment as the white light covered them all like a bubble of pure energy. The force field then became rigid, like a glass dome, and almost completely transparent. Now they were protected from the enemy.

"That's incredible," he said, while reaching out to touch the newly formed surface in front of him. What his fingers touched felt weirdly cold, like touching a Mag-Lev car's windscreen in winter. For a moment he was positive his hand would have a thin coating of frost once he removed it. Sadly it did not, only leaving a tingly against his soft skin instead.

"We are ready, Alex. Lead us out," Kindness said from the rear of their protective dome.

She smiled at Graham before speaking. "Here we go."

There was nothing Graham could say in reply, he was still amazed by the floating energy field surrounding them. He continued to look around as they set off again.

At least now he could forget about the dark patches on the ground.

With the group much smaller all of a sudden, it appeared that only a few beings were inside the bubble. The majority of Kindness' fighters were now hovering around their heads. It left the injured and a few others wandering along like a glowing target. They had been found by the enemy already, so an extra glow would not particularly matter. More of them were on the way.

The first real test of this new protective shield came at the moment Graham had spotted the tip of a strange tower poking out from behind the horizon. That alone could have explained the sudden response from Isaac's forces. Heading straight for the enemy had brought forth a group of the

creatures, sent to keep them away. Graham's little group had threatened to kick the hornet's nest by venturing so close to it.

There were five of them racing across the landscape and aiming for Graham's group, their light throwing ghostly shadows in every direction. They moved with great speed and tore at the dusty ground as they approached. The cloud they kicked up made them look as though they were backed up by a line of stampeding animals. It could have hidden anything amid its swirling, horizontal tornado like mass. The truth was they needed no such help, they were an entire compliment of fighters between them.

Seeing these creatures nearing, the group began to slow a little in preparation. Graham could see the enemy had no intention of doing the same and were instead speeding up. The two sides were set to meet with a tremendous crash. Gnarly, sharp implements of death were to fight the combined strength of the remaining Sentients head-on.

"Ready yourselves," Alex shouted.

The impact was as forceful as a hurricane force gust. Two of the fearsome creatures exploded upon contact with the field, which almost buckled under the sudden strain. The bubble leaned in toward Graham and Alex, who could only watch as their view blackened entirely. From behind the first two enemies came the thrashing remains of the three caught by the blast. They pushed through what was left of their fellow fighters, all of their slashing and slicing sword-like appendages attacking the field in one incredible show of blind rage.

"The field's going to break," Graham said as he tried to pull Alex back.

She was going nowhere. "It will hold, Graham. We must continue. Push forward."

He could not believe his eyes. The enemy were right there in front of him, no more than a metre away. They had

made a statement of intent to Graham's small group; they wanted them all crushed out of existence.

But their first attack had been a futile one, with the force field withstanding the battering with barely a scratch. They realised this within seconds of finding themselves avoiding the flying debris of their comrades. This was an intelligent enemy, not one to waste effort on a hopeless endeavour. Five of them was never going to be enough. Figuring this out had brought their attack to a swift end.

The remaining three backed away in an uncharacteristic show of caution. They were going to need a new plan of attack. In the meantime they were not too interested in trying again. As the group continued to move forward they were quite happy to wait until the time was right. They backed away to a distance of no more than a couple of metres and matched their prey's speed exactly.

Kindness joined Graham and Alex at the front.

"What are they doing?" Graham said, with both eyes tracking the enemy as it glided alongside them.

"They will try to find a weak spot in our energy shield," Kindness replied. "We must remain together at all cost, one gap is all they will need."

The three of them walked side by side. There was nothing they could do to deal with the creatures stalking their every move, for the time being. Progress was steady, but still slow. It was going to be a little while yet before the doorway they required would come into view. The enemy's stronghold was up first. It would be that which tested their resolve the most. The tower was a sight none of them ever considered they would see first-hand, let alone almost visit. Getting past it would be the making of their plan.

After that it was all very much hanging on a line of unknowns. Finding the correct doorway was one thing, opening it to a hidden shortcut was another altogether. Alex was the only one who knew where it lived, and it remained up to her to find it.

Of course they had to get past the enemy alive first.

## Chapter 24

### A misstep

*11pm, Friday: 60 minutes until Switchover*

Conrad forced the back of his heel into the locked door. He was not making an attempt to escape this time, but was releasing his impatience. After his short interrogation he had been led upstairs to what he assumed must have been the staff canteen at one point. It was an open plan room, with all of the inside furniture serving some purpose he could not yet see.

He had been left for longer than was polite in his opinion.

"Hello," he called out. "I'm getting pretty fed up with being made to wait like this."

Silence. Not even the sounds of the street were making it inside.

"I've told you what I know, dammit."

When no reply came he stepped back and leaned against one of the tables. They were arranged in one large square in the centre of the room, with a hole in the middle. It appeared ready for some kind of conference rather than a meal.

*At least you're not locked in a cell again,* Conrad considered.

Voices from outside his room soon echoed through the door. Someone was coming, hopefully to fill him in on what

he came to realise he had been missing. These people were not part of the killer-cult, but another faction entirely. One he had not known even existed until now.

The door quickly opened and a single man entered, closing it quietly behind him. He did not bother with a mask like the others all had. This far inside their world meant the need for one had already gone. Conrad was finding himself sinking deeper into the mystery.

"Good evening, Conrad," the brown haired man said. He stood a good six feet in height, with broad shoulders and a definite confidence to his movements. This was a man of obvious authority. Conrad could see it straight away.

"Who are you?" Conrad asked, standing straight automatically.

"We'll get to that, in time. First, Conrad, I'd like to apologise to you for the incident with the drone last night. To prevent our enemy from finding us, we made sure each of our drop-off-points could protect themselves autonomously. Unfortunately, it saw you and your partner as a threat."

Although Conrad appreciated the apology, he could not quite thank the man for it. He still had no clue whether his kidnappers were trustworthy or not. Their actions had not told him they were; their words had yet to either. More was needed for that to change.

When no reply came back at him in return, the man went on with his speech. "Perhaps you'd care to see something, Conrad?"

Sliding his black shirt sleeve up his arm, the man revealed his brightly lit wrist computer awaiting his command. He removed it and pulled it out into the larger tablet mode, then placed it on the table beside Conrad. Moments later an image jumped out of the small device and hovered in the space between the tables. The room had been set up to make this the main focus for those inside.

"Show me what, exactly?" Conrad asked, stepping away from the holographic display. Without his glasses it looked a little blurry to him up close. A hovering globe behind the images rotated peacefully, but this was all he could see clearly.

"Some photographs to begin with," the man said. "Do you recognise anyone here?"

Squinting at the images still failed to jog anything free. Pictures of two men, he was sure he had never seen before, hovered in the centre of the room. They were not from the police force, he was confident of that. But the images were not from the police database either, they were from street view cameras.

*Now how the hell could you have these?* Conrad thought, although he did not ask it.

"I've never seen these men before. Who are they?"

The man did not reply. Instead he brought up another collection of images. This time it was two men and a woman, all on the roof of a large building. Conrad went through the faces again, up close now. All three wore black fatigues, however one of them had removed their balaclava. He looked over this person, the woman of the group. There was something about her, something lodged at the back of his mind. He had seen her somewhere before.

"What do you see?" the man said after seeing his companion suddenly stop at one of the faces. "Do you know her?"

Conrad searched his mind in silence for a second or two, before he could remember anything. Then it hit him. "Goes by the name of Phoenix," he said, recalling an earlier conversation.

"Really?" The man became excited by this.

"Yeah. The Deputy Mayor ordered me to find her, after taking me off the killer-cult case. She was involved in the terrorist attack eighteen months ago."

"But you have no knowledge of these other people?"



“No. Should I?”

“I suppose not,” the man replied, his demeanour less excited now. “All of these people were involved. The first two weren’t at the shopping centre, but they were still part of it. The first is a man named Graham Denehey, and the second is Elliot Sumner. They were mentioned in Simova’s records from that day.”

“Why haven’t I heard about any of this then?”

The man laughed a short, snort-like laugh. “Why indeed.”

Wiping the display away, he replaced the floating photos with another page of information. A mixture of news articles, video reports and official records took centre stage in place, all seemingly about the aftermath of the terrorist attack.

“Chaos, isn’t it?” the man said, shaking his head slowly. “All of the damage to our city, all of those poor lives lost, and for what? By destroying the relay network across the entire country, these bastards left us for dead. Yet we still don’t know why. Doesn’t that strike you as odd, Conrad?”

“I guess so. Although, I’m not too sure it really matters now, does it? We’ve rebuilt the network and repaired what we could. Mayor Crawley made it happen for our city. Before you took us he’d announced his plans. For crying out loud, he’s even set a countdown clock for us.”

“Yes, switchover.”

“So, what’s this all about then?”

The man wandered over to a spare chair, then dragged it back to the table. “Please, sit,” he said. Conrad gratefully obliged. “Now,” he continued, as he stepped between a small gap in the square of tables and into the holograph filled centre. “I have another photograph for you. I don’t expect you to recognise this person, but you should see it.”

As the previous images shrank into the background a new one took their place, this time an aerial shot zoomed in

on one man's face. He stood beside a glowing relay, which appeared to be under a lot of strain.

"This man led the unknown group that took the shopping centre," the man said, his arm extended to the side and pointing directly at the photo. "His name is Anthony Burgees. In this image you can see he is doing something to one of the power and data relays. He was, if not wholly, then partly involved in causing the overload that spread across the country's network. So where is he now?"

Conrad shrugged the question away. He had no clue about any of it. Like the rest of the city, he only knew what the media had reported.

"I'll tell you where he is, Conrad, he's still out there somewhere. They all are. Every single person responsible either fled or died in some form of altercation with the police before the relays suddenly blew. We lost the rest somehow. Can you believe that?"

"Isn't it any wonder after the mess that followed?" Conrad said in return. "The country was temporarily paralysed. Heck, even the police were useless at the time. We couldn't help anyone, not with the Crime Detection System down. It's still not working correctly. Even now huge numbers of the crime that occurs in this city goes unseen and seemingly ignored by us. Don't we have more important things to do than track down these people?"

The man sighed. "That does appear to be the prevailing wisdom. The city is like a patient refusing to acknowledge its symptoms because it fears a diagnosis. Regardless of how difficult it has been to return to some kind of normality, Conrad, ignoring these symptoms could be fatal in the end. We aren't willing to take that risk, even if you and the rest of the city are."

"We?" Conrad asked, bringing the man to a halt all of a sudden. "How many people have you got here?"

"Enough to do something useful. Before I tell you more about that, I want to ask you about these terrorists. Do you

have any idea why they did what they did?"

"I couldn't say. The news said they were probably some anti-technology group, angry at our reliance on the Simova network."

"Does that seem reasonable to you?"

With a nervous rub of the back of his neck, Conrad answered. He was fully aware the official report was less than satisfactory, but that was all he had. "It doesn't really explain anything, I suppose."

"No, it does not. These terrorists took around thirty people hostage on that day. All except for one of those held made it out alive. That's not including the armed team of police and one Simova employee that died. Did you ever hear their side of it?"

Again Conrad could only raise his shoulders in reply.

"Well, I have. You see, they all had some rather interesting, and highly disturbing, things to say about it all. They saw a group of armed people very much happy with the technology we have. In fact they even mentioned an element of ideological worship of it. Something they all remembered clearly was a video message from the one these terrorists saw as their leader; a deity-like character with a digital, wireframe face. He spoke to these people like a shepherd to his flock, and they followed. He gave the name of Isaac."

"Isaac? Why that name?"

"Isn't it obvious? Simova's failed AI was named Isaac. This could all have been a simple act of revenge against the people who let him fail. But all of this is nothing more than a conspiracy theory to the wider public. Why, I must be talking nonsense," the man said, his sarcasm almost certainly aimed at someone not in the room. He then began to pack up his tablet computer, bringing his holographic demonstration to an unexpected end.

"Wait, there must be more you can tell me. I get that you're trying to locate the remaining terrorists, but what

does that have to do with the killer-cult? How are they involved? And what has any of this got to do with me and Mayor Crawley? Do you honestly believe one of us knows something?"

"We believe the terrorists and your so called killer-cult are the same thing. They're working toward an end we have yet to discover. Both you and I are searching for the same people, Conrad."

"And the Mayor, how is he involved?"

The man shrank his computer down to the wrist size and slid it back onto his arm. While he tidied up, he seemed preoccupied and deep in thought. He had heard the question, Conrad was sure of it, yet he was reluctant to answer.

"Look, I've proved I know nothing, so what's the problem?" Conrad said, pushing for an answer. He stood and neatly placed his chair against the table, then went to straighten out his own wrist computer. *Bollocks, they've still got it*, he thought, frustrated and a little pissed-off.

"Well," the man said, before again pausing. When he decided to go on, he snapped back to life and turned to Conrad. "Would you be interested in meeting the others?"

Conrad angled his head back in surprise. "Absolutely," he said.

"Oh, and my name is Derek, Derek Jackson."

\* \* \*

"There's more on the way!" Graham called at the top of his voice, as yet another enemy appeared above the nearby hill. With the rear already battling a small team of two of the creatures, it did not leave them much power to deal with more at the front.

They were becoming overwhelmed.

"We're OK," Stephen replied from the injured line. The constant attack was beginning to drain them of their supporting strength. A few had already wilted and could only move by dragging their feet along behind them. But most noticeably of all, their glow had lessened too. "We just need to hold on. Kindness needs more energy focused on the back."

"How far is there left?"

"Not far, Graham," Alex replied, her hands held out in front of her. Even *her* energy was required to withstand the enemy now. She walked close to the protective barrier and allowed her fingers to gently touch the edge. It looked as though she were pushing the dome along all by herself.

"How long can we take this for?"

"I do not know. We have to keep going."

The creatures had hardly given their tiny group a break between attacks. They were not going for an intelligent approach, but a hard and unrelenting fight. Sacrificing their own to break through the barrier did not appear to pose any problem for their leaders either. All that mattered was destroying what was left of the Sentient rebellion as fast as possible.

Over the distant hills the enemy's tower had continued to come into view more and more. Now it loomed over them like an angry giant, glaring down with its jagged spires each as big as the entire Sentient tower at Sanctuary. The landscape appeared only to serve this enormous building. Not even the red and purple sky behind could ever dare to be as threatening.

As Graham's group neared the structure he struggled to take it all in. It had not been the first time that distance and size had become relative things to him. The journey they had taken had covered what felt like only a tiny part of the actual world around them. Hours of walking, and fighting too, and only now could he say they were getting anywhere. The black crystal tower had provided the answer, and the

depressing reality that they were heading straight into danger.

All that broke up the view of the twisted and tortured structure bearing down on them, was the ravaging violence of the swarm of creatures surrounding their group. So far the enemy had failed to bring them to a halt, but that had not stopped the attacks. Each time one flung itself into the barrier and came away with parts missing or fizzing from the electrical pops that followed, the others would simply back away before doing so again. They were not at all concerned with preserving themselves for a later fight. It made each attack feel like it could be the one to succeed.

"Incoming," Stephen shouted from the middle. "Shore up the side, now, do it now!"

Before Graham could even turn to see the enemy approaching, it had already burst into flames and flying debris as yet another had launched itself into the barrier. Where the impact had happened a worrying wobble rocked through the solid dome. It had not caused a crack, as Graham expected would possibly happen at some point. That did not mean they were entirely safe though, as the area appeared thinner all of a sudden.

The enemy had found a weakness.

Stephen was in the middle of the injured group, almost dragging them all along. Three of the Sentients around him were having to hold up the more exhausted of their numbers. They were struggling, and it was only going to get worse. With the side threatening to crumble as well, it had become more than Stephen could deal with. His orders were becoming confused and chaotic.

"Alex, I need to go back and help Stephen. Are you OK by yourself?"

"Go," was all she said in response. Keeping them moving was all down to her, she had no time to think of anything else.

Another explosion hit near the front right corner of their shield, just as Graham left his position. It had missed by less than a metre. There were no remains of a creature rattling across the ground from the area. This was something else, something new.

"Here comes another," Kindness said, pointing up.

Graham looked up and saw the glowing arch of a fireball as it streaked across the sky. This one also missed, sending a floor shuddering boom through the dirt. The enemy were firing mortar style projectiles from the tower. It was only a matter of shortening their aim to get a direct hit.

It did not take them long to do so.

The third shot crashed into the top of the protective shield, cascading fire down the sides of the dome. A temporary gap blinked open in return. The fight was coming from all sides, all of a sudden.

"Stephen, can I help?" Graham said as he ducked from another incoming fireball. This one missed by less than a foot or two. Friendly fire was another acceptable factor of the enemy's attack it seemed, as the miss took out a handful of the creatures assigned that side of the barrier.

"Graham, thank goodness. Are you able to help with maintaining this side of the shield?"

"I'm not sure if I can do th--"

"You can, just try it."

As with every other lesson so far, Graham was expected to pick it up first time without delay. He had at least realised by now and did not bother to ask again, or tell of his lack of confidence. They were in the middle of a raging battle, there was simply no time to focus on anything else.

He had seen Alex do it earlier, and Kindness too, so he decided to go straight for it. With both hands splayed open as wide as he could manage, he slapped them against the cold dome and pushed against it. Nothing happened. He was going about it like a human again – he had become fed up with hearing this, but it was the hard truth.

A look around gave him a moment of clarity as he saw the state of their little group. It was not looking good for them. They had only just made it past the point that took them nearest to the tower. There was still a way to go yet. He needed to do his part.

One last try, he decided. So again he repeated the process of opening out his palms and forcefully smacking them against the barrier. This time the message had gotten through to the Sentient he knew he could be. A bright light leapt from his hands and spread out through the glowing shield. It reached out of his skin like little wires of energy, which then worked their way into the glass structure as if following an embedded circuitry. To say he was impressed would only be a small percentage of the truth. As with each other time he copied the actions of a Sentient, he was astonished.

What he heard next ripped that feeling away like a tidal wave of emotion, instantly wiping him out. It was a voice, one he had not heard for a long time. Not his wife, Jane, or his best friend, Elliot, but someone else he knew from his human days. Was it possible he imagined the voice that again asked for him by name? The second he turned to face its source, he knew for sure.

It was Phoenix!

"Graham? Can you hear me?" The ghostly outline of a person said through the building static.

"How? I can't believe it. Yes, yes, I can hear you. Phoenix, I can hear you. I'm here."

She looked in his general direction, but her face said she had not found him just yet.

"I'm here. Shit, she can't hear me."

"Graham, what is going on? Who is that?" Stephen said.

Kindness, by contrast, had taken the sudden appearance of an unknown apparition as a sign of another attack, this time from the inside. He rushed over to the area and forced himself into the flickering image.



"The Overseer!" he boomed at the top of his voice.

"Wait, Kindness," Graham called, with his hands raised to firm up his order.

But it was not enough. Kindness sent his left arm straight through the glimmering shape in his best attempt at cutting it down in place. He was as surprised as the rest of them to see his glowing arm pass right through Phoenix's middle without hitting anything. She was not really there.

"Fuck. Graham, thank God, I've finally found you," she said, as the attempted strike went by totally unnoticed. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. He did it, Luke actually got out and reached you. Is he there with you too?"

She went silent.

"How's my family? Are they safe?"

No reply.

"Phoenix? What's happening?"

When she spoke again, she started with his first question rather than the most important.

"He's here, Graham. I had no idea it was him at first. Christ, he's not doing well. He was badly injured when he reached me."

There was a noticeable problem with communication. Only a few of his words had made it through to Phoenix and even then the context was almost certainly missing. As far as he could tell, there had been a fight of some kind and Luke had been hurt. It was still amazing to find out that Luke had made it out at all. According to Kindness and the other Sentients there with him, Luke had almost certainly perished with those he infiltrated the Conduit with. To find out he survived, and more than that, gotten a message to those out in the real world, was almost more than Graham could cope with.

He sucked in his gut as the relief nearly floored him like a punch to the side of the head. Only after fighting back the feelings welling up inside could he even consider replying.

"Where are you? How are you talking to me?"

"We're using some kind of Sentient device, called a Conduit. Graham, we're here to get you out. Can you get to a Conduit at your end?"

For her sake he decided to keep his current situation to himself for fear of diluting the conversation further. The fight to save the remaining Sentients was his first concern, but it was not going to end just yet. While they moved along under the constant weight of the enemy, he thought on his own escape for the first time in hours. There was only one way he knew of achieving that, and it was by reversing whatever Luke did to get him there.

"That won't work. The Conduit is a no go. There's no way of getting to it," he said.

"Graham, there isn't time to talk with this being," Kindness interrupted them to say. "We are nearing the exit, look."

There, in the dead centre of the view ahead, was a sight that filled Graham with as much dread as joy. The doorway was a swirling mass. Their small group would easily fit through it without even having to breathe in, it was huge. Although lying in their way was another force field, this time surrounding their exit. This was the doorway Alex would be expected to open once they arrived. It was nothing like the ones he saw her open before.

"Phoenix, I'm running out of time. Can you ask Luke something for me?" Graham said, still with a degree of disbelief.

"Go ahead," she replied, after another inconvenient delay.

"I need to know how to get back to my body? I know it's still somewhere in the Sanctuary ruins, but I have no idea how to get to it from inside here."

Again the conversation was put on hold while his message struggled to get through to those at the other end. It was anything but silent around him though, as the enemy

had not missed any opportunity to disrupt them at all. The fireballs had continued to light up the sky – still their aim was far less than accurate. If their real purpose was to scare them, then they were at least excelling at this.

Graham had to push against the dome as one of the creatures decided to begin hacking at the other side. He flinched each time a strike gave off a glowing after effect on the surface of the barrier right in front of him. His stored energy was being stolen with each impact, but he could not leave the area. No-one else was able to step in for him.

The shimmering outline of Phoenix disappeared for a frightening few seconds before reappearing again. She then began to speak.

“He says he can’t remember anything about that. Graham, he’s been like this since he turned up at my home. His memories are all messed up or missing.”

That was the last thing he wanted to hear after so much had been given back to him. Hope had been a useful feeling and one that had been all but vacant until then. It had already begun to be chipped away at. Missing memories meant missing information, the most important of which was his only chance of returning to the human world.

“Shit, that can’t be right. He can’t have lost that,” Graham said. His attacker tried another forceful strike against the dome in front of him – right between his eyes too. He twisted his head away to avoid it, even though the barrier was still holding.

“Graham, I believe there should be another way.” Stephen had left the gathering of injured Sentients and joined him at his side, like a comrade in arms. He placed an arm on Graham’s shoulder to bring his ranting to a swift end. “Alex,” he called. “Keep us moving at all times. We are going to try something back here.”

“Fine,” she replied, again without looking away from the front.

“Phoenix, this is Stephen here.”

“Stephen? How are you-?”

“That is a long story, and one we definitely don’t have time to go into right now. I believe the Conduits go in both directions. If they use it to bring a Sentient out of this world, then it stands to reason that they should be able to do the opposite too.”

The suggestion had Graham wanting to bash his head against the solid surface in front of him; why had he not considered that before? It was so obvious to him now. Phoenix had somehow taken control of a Conduit in the real world and she had Luke right next to her. If he was the only one with the knowledge of how to return Graham to his real body, then they had to bring him into the Sentient world again. It was where he belonged after all.

Phoenix began speaking again, this time with a noticeable increase in excitement. The idea had apparently achieved Luke’s approval.

“You’re a fucking genius,” she said.

## Chapter 25

### Relentless

**G**raham stared into the tornado of matter spinning around within the doorway as if caught in a tumble dryer. This was the exit, their last escape before reaching the puzzle maze hidden beyond. Once they were through, the rest of the journey would be a quick dash to the end. The creatures still trying to stamp them out of existence would have a hard time getting ahead of them after that. Unless they were a step in front and were waiting on the other side. They would not know for sure if that was the case until they stepped through.

As they approached the doorway, with the enemy's unrelenting attack coming from all sides, the attention of the group focused on the back half of the barrier. The plan was to merge the front of the shield with that of the doorway. Alex would then be their only hope of getting past it while the fight continued around them. It was risky holding position for too long, but in this case they had no other options.

The ground led down a slight decline before it reached the edge of the doorway. After cresting the hill, they had begun to take this small slope and were quickly increasing their pace. They moved along it like a ball rolling down a hill, taking on more speed as they travelled. Seeing the doorway right in front of them boosted their progress through sheer determination alone.

Kindness had decided to join Alex at the front as they neared their destination. While in his new position at the side of the group, Graham had been doing his best to strengthen his part of the barrier. Now they were nearing the end, he could suddenly feel a sense of expectation. They were going to make it there irrelevant of what the enemy tried next. The time had come for him to begin planning his own escape again.

He left his area as soon as the two protective shields started to merge, like bubbles being carefully pushed together; too firmly and one would surely pop. The front was now the place to be.

"What happens now?" he asked the moment he took his place beside Alex, Kindness and then Stephen straight after.

They were only a metre or so away from the doorway's entrance, but its own force field still kept them back. It was a frustrating situation to be in, with the way out less than a few steps away. For now it was out of reach.

"Alex, are you able to remove the barrier from the exit?" he said after the others had struggled to answer his first question.

She stood with a stern look on her face as the doorway stretched high above. The sight of it clearly scared her. "I will try," she replied with a child-high kick of the shield blocking her way. "I need the creatures kept as far away as you can manage. While I do this, they will become increasingly agitated and will try anything to stop me. The protective barrier must be maintained at all times. No drop-outs whatsoever, OK?"

Kindness gave no reply, but instead left them once Alex had finished her orders. His place was to be with his own fighters as they fought off the enemy. One false move now would leave them open to another massacre – possibly the last they would ever face, before their extinction. It left Graham and Stephen with nothing to do but watch as the

small being in front of them unlocked the doorway from a distance.

While the enemy continued its barrage just behind a thinning layer of shield, Alex knelt down, with one hand placed firmly against the shimmering surface holding them at bay. She closed her eyes and concentrated hard, her eyes squinting at the sides from the sheer energy required. The resulting flashes of light were much brighter than any the creatures could manage from outside. Not even the fireballs racing across the landscape could compare. She was showing her true strength for the first time.

"Once we're through, what then?" Graham asked Stephen, a hand held up in front of his eyes to block out the glow.

Stephen did the same with his own hands. "It will be a short distance before we reach the tunnel. Alex assured me it was still there."

"Still there?" Graham raised his voice as another deep thud vibrated through the shield above them from the enemy's latest attack.

"She made the tunnel, Graham. It is how she found you. The place you were hiding, and the location of the puzzle maze, are contained within a small offshoot of this level. It exists between layers of the Sentient world. There are many that do this, including the one these Sentients were hiding in. The difference with yours is that it holds the only remaining safety within this world. Isaac will find it almost impossible to break into. That's if we can get through this blasted force field of course."

It sounded easy enough to Graham. The rest of the journey was set to follow their plan without much chance of deviation. In fact the enemy had reacted almost exactly as Kindness had predicted. If anything, things were going slightly better than expected, at least from Graham's perspective.

Rather than stand around, Graham decided to help Alex – if it was even possible to do so. He lowered himself to her level and touched her arm gently. For a tentative few seconds she appeared not to know he was there at all. When she opened her eyes and acknowledged him, it was only for a second before her entire concentration was stolen away again. All he could do to help turned out to be exactly what she needed; he was there to offer moral support.

“You can do this, Alex, I know you can,” he said, squeezing her thin arm softly.

His attention then switched to what he hoped was happening in the real world. The conversation with Phoenix had ended with the possibility of uploading Luke back into the Sentient world. He had no idea how they were going to do that, or whether it was likely to work. If they could do it, then his escape would be the next thing to work on.

But again the quietness was broken with ease.

A ripple raced along the structure of their dome as an airborne fireball impacted the rear. Graham was horrified to see a gaping hole in their protective shield. The enemy had found a weakness somehow. He raced toward the break to find Kindness already holding back the attempted invasion alone, his arms spitting energy out like a faulty wireless power relay.

“What happened?” he screamed above the gnashing teeth of one of the creatures still trying to push through.

“There are too many, Graham Denehey, we cannot hold them for much longer. Alex must open the doorway before the entire barrier collapses. We have already lost almost ten of my fighters within the shield. Soon there will not be enough energy to sustain the attack.”

This had been the bad thing Graham was waiting for; suddenly things were not quite as safe as they had seemed. Their combined energy had begun to drain faster somehow. The enemy had found a way of robbing them of it.



\* \* \*

Conrad stepped into the heart of the operating centre, where the real work was being done. He was surprised to find himself standing before a floor to ceiling screen, curved to allow a 180 degree view that filled his world suddenly. It contained a frenzy of information, all whizzing about and mingling where the two people operating it dictated with their limbs. Impressive, but a little daunting for Conrad too.

"This is the brain of our team, Conrad. What do you think?" Derek said, the collar of his white shirt pushed up by his reached out arm.

"I'm not really sure."

"Well, while you decide, allow me to introduce you to the others. Please." Derek gestured away from the screen and to a collection of tables, setup against the far wall.

Conrad followed his orders, but kept his eyes fixed on the confused display of data spanning the large screen. He could see the full extent of Derek's spying right there in front of him. They had everything; photos from his own crime scenes, records of witness statements, even detailed backgrounds for the many victims. The two operating the system were like a pair of athletes locked in some form of competition. They moved their bodies together to shift the information around, their limbs acting as the inputs.

Someone there had access to the police database, or at least was an incredibly competent hacker.

"Conrad?"

He turned away from the dancing pair and settled his gaze upon each of the three he faced in turn. Two women and a man, all with a visible nervousness painted across their faces. They sat at another bank of sizeable screens,

these much more recognisable in design, with ordinary touch screens too.

After a nod of encouragement from the man in charge, the three introduced themselves. From left to right, their names were Jason Mitchell, Sandra Hobson and a cute little thing named Nessa Nayak. Conrad reacted to the mention of the surname Nayak instantly.

"Nayak, as in related to Rama Nayak?" he asked. It never occurred to him that bringing up the dead man's name might have caused some emotional pain. After all, he had not been dead for long.

Nessa lowered her head and dropped her big brown eyes to the ground. "He was my brother," she replied, her hair dark as night and shining beneath the bright light of the room.

Derek quickly stepped forward and gently touched Nessa's back. "The wound is still raw, Conrad."

"What happened to him?"

Jason stood and then answered bluntly. "He was murdered. We're being hunted by whoever's behind it all. They killed Oliver at one of their warehouses, after he found their supplies, then tracked Rama down and did the same to him. We'd only cleared his apartment the day before. You arrived before we could return and finish the job."

That made perfect sense to Conrad. Witnesses had seen two men removing black bags from the apartment, which meant the second pair seen on the stairs had to have been the killers. It was all adding up now. Two factions were at war, one of which had sustained severe losses recently and tried desperately to evade the other.

"We found remains of paperwork everywhere, and a data coin. Was this the evidence you've gathered so far?" Conrad said.

Jason nodded. "We have it all here, as well. But Oliver, Rama and I kept our own copies at the apartment too. Now none of us can go back there, just in case they catch us."

"That data coin you stole had everything about our plan to grab the Mayor at his speech." The other woman, Sandra Hobson, was now speaking. "When you hacked it to get the activation code for the dead-drop, you almost gave us away. If the enemy had found it, we'd have been screwed. Do you still have it?"

Conrad swallowed hard. "The Mayor's new taskforce has it."

"You moron," Sandra yelled at him, then spoke to the man in charge with a nervous increase in volume. "Sir, we should move to another location immediately. This place might not be safe anymore."

"That won't be necessary, Sandra," the man in charge began. "All of the information on the data coin will self-delete if anyone tampers with it." He smiled before continuing. "We've been doing this for a while, Conrad, more than a year in truth. What we've discovered has put us all at great risk. There are people out there who want us dead. We've been hiding here since the beginning."

"Hiding from who? Who are these people you're talking about, the killer-cult? Nothing you've told me explains that. Why are they after you?"

"Sandra, show him," he said. "I'm needed elsewhere. Come find me once you're finished." As he went to leave, he stopped himself and hesitated for a second. Finally he added, "Oliver and Rama were good men, Conrad, good men. Such a shame."

Conrad watched him leave and was instantly set upon by a bout of nervous shakes.

"Jason," Sandra began - a scornful look at Conrad while she spoke. "Fetch the *evidence*."

Sat on the ground beside the table was a knee-high metal lock-box with a palm-print-reader installed on its lid. A few alterations - the odd reinforced panel here and there, and thick steel corners - had made it into something even more secure. It was no longer intended for jewellery or

loose documents anymore, but something worth killing over. Jason slapped his hand onto the smooth surface of the palm-print-reader and waited while a quick scan was taken. With his access granted a moment later, he swung its hinged lid open. He then removed a small black box, which he placed in the centre of the table.

Conrad almost choked when he realised what it was. "Holy shit, where did you get this from." He could not hold himself back, he had to touch it and turn it over in his hands. On the front it appeared nothing more harmful than a piece of useless plastic, but on the other side it was a different story. Four screw holes and two larger cut-outs told him what it was.

"Matches the marks on your victims, doesn't it?" Jason said proudly. "One of these was attached at some point, we think, which left the holes and the rectangular impressions on their skin too. We reckon it didn't work right, so they dumped the bodies. But since you've found a few dump sites I guess they've continued to try."

"We thought the marks were left by some form of ritual. They weren't mutilated at all, they were experimented on." Conrad said before changing the subject slightly. "How on earth do you know about my case? No-one outside the force should be aware of any of this?" He was enraged by the suggestion that his secrecy had been for nothing.

"We've been digging around for a while, Conrad," Sandra said. "We thought the marks were left by a cult-like ritual too, at least at first. That isn't what this is though. But you don't find anything out unless you really look. Of course, we've not always acted within the confines of the law during our search for the truth."

"But you have everything I had, every single thing I found and catalogued on the police system."

"The security protocols you lot use are pretty useless. I cracked them in one afternoon," Nessa added with a smirk. "We're in your police network, have been for a while."

"That's why we initially believed you were part of the problem," Sandra said. "We could see what you had and what you were keeping from the public."

"So why didn't you take it to the press?" Conrad was certain he would have in the same position.

"Didn't you hear me earlier," Jason interrupted with. "We can't trust anyone, we're being hunted."

Disbelief from what he was hearing only made what Jason pulled from the container next, that much more difficult for Conrad to take on board. He produced a violent looking submachine gun, then offered it over.

"What do you make of this?"

Conrad declined the offer and instead chose to answer empty handed. "I've never seen a weapon design like that before. But I'd say the ball at the end allows it to fire at multiple angles, and probably at the same time too. Where did you get these things from?"

"GEL."

"What? I found a shipping manifest for GEL, at least the remains of one. Are you telling me that's where this was?" Conrad was furious to learn this. He had sent Ericsson and Roberts to check the place out only to be disappointed in the end. Once again the authorities had been a step too far behind.

Jason called over to the pair still swinging and swaying by the large screen. The way they interacted with the computer still engrossed Conrad. "Hey, can you bring up the video record we took at the GEL warehouse? I think Conrad needs to see for himself."

"Sure," the woman answered without a single stutter to her flowing movements. A second later and the entire screen burst to life. The sound crackled as the video began to play of the inside of the GEL building.

Instantly Conrad spotted the rows of wooden crates lining the inside of the warehouse. Each was around a metre in width, large enough to contain many thousands of

the small black boxes. Or, he considered with a shudder, a small army's worth of weapons.

When the video peeked into one of the open crates, Jason froze it in place with one command. "Hold it there. See, Conrad, we found them just sitting there. Once we'd gone through all fifty we had a complete record. Two were filled with these boxes and the rest had these guns, all stacked up neatly together."

"Why didn't you report it to the police? We'd have had it all confiscated by now," Conrad said, his disapproval obvious in tone as well as words.

"Fast forward to the end, show us the last minute or so," Jason ordered of the operators at the front.

Conrad kept his stare on Jason as he waited for a reasonable answer. While the video restarted, he tried his best to ignore it. Only when a gunshot rang out did he turn to watch. He blinked in shock as he noticed Oliver Bennington land heavily on the floor. He had been shot in the head, execution style. Standing over the body was a large man, gun still smoking in his hand.

Jason began to explain as the video played on. "We were discovered during our search. Rama and me only just got out. We had to watch from the street corner as one of these bastards murdered Oliver, then took him away. You know what happened to him next."

"So after they found you they attacked and killed Oliver?" Conrad said. He waited for a nod before going on. "Then dumped his body. I found it days later, but without any signs of mutilation. They didn't try to put one of these on him, they just caught him and murdered him."

"Yep," Jason said.

"OK, so now, who the fuck are these people? Are they the same terrorists from last year? And what are they planning to do with these boxes and weapons?"

Jason remained tight lipped, instead looking to Sandra for guidance. She answered on his behalf.

"We're done here," she said.

"What? No, I've still got so many questions." Conrad gripped the small black box tightly in his hand. He was not about to give it back until he understood it all.

"Derek wants you in on the next interrogation. You've seen all you need up here, now follow me."

"Interrogation, you mean of Mayor Crawley?"

"That's the one. Guys, keep working while I take Mr. Robinson downstairs. I'll be right back after."

Jason and Nessa each smiled and nodded in return, as Sandra walked for the door without Conrad. She was not going to allow him a spare second to gather his thoughts together. Everything was coming at him thick and fast. He only hoped he could absorb it all quick enough. He jogged after her and was quickly heading down the hallway with a *click-clack* of his shoes upon the floor.

As he followed he considered the information he had just been force-fed. This second faction had been involved longer than his case had existed. They had searched for answers for much longer. So what had brought them in in the first place? If not the murders he was investigating, then it had to have been something equally as brutal.

Maybe the Mayor did have the answers after all? Either way, he was going to find out.

\* \* \*

"They're trying again!" Graham said, his hands pushed hard against the rear of the protective shield. His fingers were burning now, as though someone was slowly trying to snap them off. After a few seconds of searing heat he had to remove them, before being forced to replace them straight after. At the rate the enemy were attacking, he would not be able to take it for much longer.

With Kindness standing solidly right beside him, they still had the creatures behind the shield. But without the doorway opening they were one large and stationary target. They were losing the fight one head-on attack at a time. There was more than just one small area threatening to collapse now, but the entire thing. Already they had been forced to reseal it in three places.

"Graham Denehey," Kindness shouted above the crashing sounds around them. "You must help Alex open the doorway."

"What about you?"

"I will hold this area, now go. We haven't much time left."

Graham pulled his sore hands away from the barrier and was shocked to see them blackened from the heat. He could not feel them at all anymore either. With both hands held out in front of him, open to the air – as he often did after a burn in the real world – he leapt around the group of injured as he made his way to the front. The weaker the force field had become, the more they had been required to join in the fight. That currently meant their combined energy was also being drained like a leach sucked their life-force away.

Past them, he found Alex still down on one knee, her head drooping from the strain. She again clamped her eyes shut. When he arrived next to her, he noticed something else too. Her face had begun to glow a tiny amount.

"Alex?"

"Yes Graham," she replied, with a strangely digital sounding distortion to her voice.

"Are you OK? You sound different."

"I am almost through."

He thought better of asking any more. Whatever was happening, it had no immediate effect on them or her. It was clear to Graham what was going on though; she was becoming herself again. The Sentient that hid inside had started to break free of the illusion. She did not appear to



have the strength to uphold it and bring down the shield around the doorway at the same time.

"How much longer?" He lowered himself to see her face as he asked.

"Less than a minute longer. We need to be prepared to leave the instant it is down."

"I'll tell the others. Make sure you're first through, OK? Promise me?"

A slow nod was all she gave him to confirm. She then returned to her work, her expression demonstrating exactly how engrossed by the task she had become. Every time she moved her head to the side, the glow intensified a little more. It was still far from the same brightness as a normal Sentient, but it was not going to be long before that changed.

The short trip back to Kindness should have been one with a good message, the first in a while too. Graham felt positive again about their chances. With the doorway's barrier about to come down, it was expected that their next concern would be to get everyone through without any more losses. So far their escape had claimed nearly a quarter of the Sentients that had remained.

Unfortunately, that was not to be.

Graham had made it to Kindness' side as the loudest bang so far raced past him, along with a gust of fast moving air. It buffeted his back while he tried his best to remain standing. Neither won outright in the end. His left leg buckled beneath him and brought him halfway to the floor, where he stayed and looked around in confusion. Where had the explosion come from?

"The doorway is open, look!" Stephen called at the top of his voice.

Alex had actually managed it. Graham watched in astonishment as the shimmering surface surrounding the exit dissolved into the air. Their escape route was open and beckoning them through.

But to the side of it, he spotted the same was true of their barrier as well. There was a large hole in the side.

One of the creatures slowly hovered in through the gap. Graham launched himself to his feet and aimed straight for it. The others had already started to race through the doorway and were disappearing into the swirling matter beyond. They were seeing their enemy to their side, like a growling and deadly doorman about to close the door on the rest of them.

"Stephen, get them all through, now," he ordered as the intense fear quickly got the better of him.

He could not wait for an answer and instead lunged into the side of the small portion of the shield still active around the side wall. With all the remaining strength available to him, he forced his flashing anger into the field in one last push. It began to close with an unexpected and immense speed, working the hole together like a bandage of pure energy.

The creature had made it part of the way through already and quickly became trapped in his quick-fix seal. It thrashed about while he tried squeezing it as hard as he could, as though it were a nut he tried to crack open. Eventually he could feel it giving way. The shield was cutting through it and closing. When the creature finally stopped its death-throws, he was left with a large piece of it fizzing and hissing in front of him.

Now it was just left for the rest of them to make it through. To guarantee they all did, he chose to stay in position to shore up the barrier for as long as he could.

"Go, go, go," he ordered of each Sentient speeding by.

He was overjoyed to see them all vanishing from view through the doorway. They had made it, the escape was working. As the last rushed past, he looked to Kindness, who had begun to make preparations to bring down the barrier. They shared a knowing glance. With the enemy attack continuing unabated, there was no time for them all

to break free of the shield and reform. The Sentients floating around the force field were not set to escape along with the others. Kindness was going to stay until the very last moment, before leaving his brave soldiers behind.

Graham smiled and then stepped backwards into the spinning exit. His last view of the evil world Isaac had created was wiped out in seconds, replaced immediately afterwards with a pure white light.

Relief was a welcome – and fashionably late – guest to the party. The world beyond the last slowly formed around him. Turning round, he saw the others waiting for further instructions. They looked to him, their featureless faces still able to impart the unease they all felt. Why they were standing around when the end of their journey resided somewhere nearby was beyond him. He guessed Alex was finding it difficult to find it again. That would be another unexpected problem they could just do without.

Kindness appeared behind him. He watched as no-one else followed. The last of the Sentient fighters had no doubt faced a swift end as soon as the enemy had been let in. Now they were to do what they could to slow down the creatures. But from Graham's side, they could lock the doorway with another barrier, this time one small and massively powerful. The enemy would be kept back for much longer this time, while they found the tunnel.

He worked his way through the dense crowd as he searched for Alex somewhere at the front. This world was one he strangely recognised from before. It was a sweeping landscape of white hills and snow topped trees. This path took them to the puzzle maze alright. Only they still needed the exact tunnel to reach it. Alex knew where it was.

Spotting Stephen kneeling down with his back to the group had Graham speeding up and storming through the beings in his way. Stephen was leaning over something he held in his arms. Or was it someone?

"No! Alex," he said, a sudden shudder as a coldness swept across his body.

Stephen held Alex against his chest, his arms wrapped around her tightly. He looked up to Graham and gave him a slow nod. She was injured, that much was devastatingly clear, but exactly how bad remained undetermined.

"I tried to stop it," Stephen said.

There were no words on Graham's tongue, just despair. A deep wound through her centre flickered with a static charge where the enemy had struck. The sight of her lying there, her eyes damp and glaring, made him fall to his knees beside them. He could not imagine her not existing anymore, it was simply not possible to him. It made little sense to him to think any other way. He refused to accept she was dying, despite the fact she had been run through.

"What are you doing?" Stephen asked as Graham hauled her up into his arms and rested her head gently against his shoulder. Her arms and legs hung loose and motionless.

"I'm getting her to safety," Graham replied, before walking ahead of the group. He then began to whisper to Alex as he carried her. "Hey, Alex, honey. I need you to do one more thing for me, then we can patch you up."

She could not raise her head to answer. Instead she tried to speak with her face almost nestled against Graham's neck, which made her words muffled and weak.

"What do you need me to do?" she murmured, the words almost lost to a background hiss of static in her voice.

"Can you open the tunnel to the puzzle maze for me? Once we're there, Kindness will be able to help you. Is that OK?" He hated having to ask her to do anything else, but they had no choice, they had to end their journey finally. The only way they were going to do that was with Alex's help.

"I will try, Graham." Her voice wavered slightly before she then added, "I am glad I met you."

“Hey, don’t you dare talk like that, you hear me? I’m going to get you help.”

With one hand still hanging by her side, she slowly lifted the other and waved it out in front of them. Then, and without even looking, she opened a small tunnel that ran off to the side of their current route. After the exit had appeared, she immediately became floppy, like a child-sized rag-doll.

Feeling Alex suddenly lose consciousness made Graham call back to Stephen in a panic. “Get Kindness here now!” he yelled.

## Chapter 26

### Switchover

*11:50pm, Friday: ten minutes until Switchover*

**H**e's all yours," Sandra said, before turning and walking away again. She delivered Conrad to interview room two, where the interrogation of the Mayor had already started.

Derek stood before the one-way mirror, his arms crossed and a stern look upon his face. He kept his eyes locked onto the proceedings beyond the glass, and only acknowledged another's presence with a flick of his head.

"What's going on in there?" Conrad asked. From his view of the room, he could see it matched the exact same as the interview rooms in his own station. In the middle was a steel table with electronically locking cuffs built in to its flat surface. Either side of the table were metal chairs, each of which were bolted to the ground. He had seen enough of these kinds of chats go wrong to appreciate the need for the extra-secure furniture. Although he did not expect anything of the sort from the Mayor, who sat with his arms clamped to the table.

Derek intensified his glare into the room, then spoke with a renewed degree of severity. "We're poking the nest, trying to rattle the Queen free."

"What does that mean?"

"He knows what we're after. Only after increasing the pressure will we see the real him. The image of a broken

and desperate man is nothing more than a facade. Beneath, there is the head of a vast hive of evil. We just need the right amount of force to bring it out of him."

Conrad stood beside Derek and tried to see the same of his Mayor. Unfortunately, all he could see in return was exactly what resided at the surface. He saw no sign of anything else.

"Please, Derek, I need answers. You've got to tell me why he's so important. What could he possibly know about any of this?"

"Do you enjoy your job, Conrad?"

The question seemed completely irrelevant, yet he could not help but go along with it.

"Sure, why?"

"Because you are a dying breed, Conrad. We both are. We've watched as the world slowly chose to give up on itself, watched as technology reached a point where it threatened to replace us all, if not for our attempts to control it. I can't help but ask myself if it is all our fault; maybe if we'd stood up and said 'no' to it all we would still be in charge."

"We are still in charge," Conrad said, before questioning himself a moment later. "Aren't we?"

"No, Conrad, we are not. People like our Mayor, the ones determined to make drones out of us all, are the ones really in control. The very moment Simova stepped over the line and created the first AI we were all doomed. Was it worth it? Was my wife supposed to die because a few crazy people were angry it failed? It was nothing but a hellish curse upon the Earth, one I'm glad no longer exists. When these terrorists destroyed the relays, they destroyed lives."

"What happened to your wife?"

Derek looked to him and smiled. "You're a good person, Conrad. Not many care enough to ask. We've all suffered." He placed both hands on the counter in front of the glass while he explained. "She was travelling across the country

by Mag-Lev when the relays blew. The overload spread right through the lines, causing many to crash. Hers sped out of control before hitting another coming the other way. I went for weeks without knowing what happened. Then when I finally found out, I tried to find answers. I couldn't find any. Everyone involved, all of the city's police force, emergency services and politicians knew nothing."

"So you decided to find them yourself," Conrad said, finishing the sentiment himself.

"Exactly, and that is what you see here today. All of my anger, all of my hurt and pain, put into this one endeavour. I will not rest until I have the bastards in charge of it in my hands."

They both took comfort in silence, for a short while. Conrad could understand the betrayal Derek still felt after losing so much. Even though he had not lost his own wife, Gloria, in the same way, the suddenness had affected him similarly. They both chose to turn to work of some kind to help them heal.

When the man conducting the interview left the room and joined them outside, Conrad remained quiet. He needed to let them work for now. His own chance for answers was fast approaching.

"Please," Mayor Crawley called to them through the open door. "I don't know anything. You have to let me go, you have to. I can pay you for my freedom."

The interviewer slammed the door shut, then spoke. "Sir," he said, with an attempted salute.

"Anything?" Derek asked the bearded man.

"Nothing, sir. He's still denying his involvement."

"Fine, you can go." Derek addressed Conrad unexpectedly. "Care to join me?"

Before he could answer, Derek had already stepped into the interview room and was taking his seat. Conrad did not think about it for long, he followed soon after. As he took the corner and crossed the threshold, his mind raced with



an almost endless list of questions he wanted to ask the Mayor.

Once he took his place at the back of the room, the tension grew. He stood with his back leaning against the glass and arms crossed. Good cop or bad cop, Conrad was not entirely sure at that moment.

"Hello Mayor Crawley, how are you feeling?" Derek asked.

Disturbingly the Mayor chose not to look Derek in the eyes, but to stare directly at Conrad instead. "I'm very disappointed, Conrad. I had such high hopes for you," he said.

Derek sent a sidelong look to Conrad standing behind. "Anything you'd like to say, before I begin?"

"I have a question," Mayor Crawley said, interrupting. The panic and fear in his voice only a moment earlier had suddenly vanished without a trace. Had they already dug beneath the mask?

"Of course, go ahead."

"Does anyone have the time?"

Conrad shot a perplexed look back at the Mayor. What was it with these people? They all spoke cryptically, never just saying what they thought.

"The time, that's what you want to ask?" Conrad said. "Sir, you're being held against your will by these people, don't you want to know why?"

The question was ignored by both of Conrad's companions.

"My wrist device says 11:57, why do you ask?" Derek held his wrist computer out for the Mayor to see.

"Three minutes to go, excellent."

"Three minutes until what? Dammit Mayor Crawley, stop messing about." Conrad was quickly becoming the angry and frustrated cop, not the good or the bad.

Mayor Crawley laughed to himself. "Do either of you like movies?"

Conrad threw his arms up in the air in disbelief.

"Well, you know that moment when the hero of the movie has been captured and the baddy is giving his big speech?" Mayor Crawley waited for a response. He got none. "And the enemy proudly tells him the entire plan? He always does so with just enough time left for the hero to stop it, doesn't he? Well, that isn't happening this time, I'm afraid. Time is very much up, Gentleman."

"Cut the bullshit, Mr Mayor," Derek snapped. He then removed his wrist computer and activated its holographic projector. "Who is this man?"

Suddenly the Mayor became like a sponge being wrung free of moisture; it came pouring out. Seeing Conrad on the other side had angered him greatly, making his every word one aimed directly at him. "Why, that's Anthony Burgees."

"OK," Derek said. "Can you explain how you know him?"

"Of course. He once worked for the same being I do. I own an import company, which he used to bring illegal technology into the country. A real shame, losing him like that. Someone really *stuck it* to him."

"Yes, we know about the import company. We found details about it in your personal files; a company called GEL. When we first began looking into you, after evidence of bribing came to our attention, we started to dig deeper. We know you were involved in the terrorist attack last year, we have pages of transactions linking you to it. But you've been buying smaller companies up like there's no tomorrow too, why? What are you planning next?"

"Surely you know all of this already, *Derek*? To become Mayor I had to follow the Master's instructions exactly. And as for the attacks last year, I helped finance the entire thing."

*The Master!* Conrad had to repeat this inside his head.

"He wanted me in charge of the relay repairs, while he worked on building his army," Mayor Crawley continued. "You'll find a clear link between me and countless illegal

imports over the last few months. GEL has been incredibly busy of late, what with shipping our supplies to each city. I tell you, it's amazing what you can do with enough money."

Conrad stepped forward to ask his own question. "You became Mayor to have access to the relay repairs for New Chelmsford? Why, what good does that do?"

"Do I have to tell you everything? Oh well. You see, the replacement design is all nonsense. It doesn't make anything faster at all. They will allow my master to claim the city as his own. He designed the new relays himself, quite ingenious really."

"Tell us what happens when you switch them on, now!" Derek shouted directly into the Mayor's face. "What happens at Switchover?"

"You can't stop it, no-one can. When the Switchover clock runs out, the world will finally see. They will meet the Master too."

Conrad raced around the table and took the Mayor by the scruff of the neck. "Spit it out. Who is the Master?"

After another snort of laughter, Mayor Crawley eventually replied with a single name. "Isaac."

"Impossible," Derek said. "He doesn't exist anymore."

"I assure you, that is quite incorrect, *Derek*. He's here, he has been for a while, plotting and planning out his rise to power. Taking New Chelmsford is just the beginning. Soon the war will reach across the entire country." Mayor Crawley stopped for a second, then asked, "Is it midnight yet?"

Conrad turned to Derek, who took his wrist computer from the table to check. He nodded to confirm.

"Perfect," the Mayor said, with a wide smile on his face. "I suggest you all go outside to see this, it's going to be impressive!"

For a short while, both Conrad and Derek looked at the Mayor. They were stunned by his excitement. Something had started to happen, but only he knew what that was. For

the rest of the city, it was going to be a complete and dreadful surprise.

Derek was first to speak again, into his wrist computer this time. "What's happening up there?"

Jason replied. "Nothing, why?"

"I want everyone outside, right now."

"I'm coming too," Conrad said, following Derek out the room soon after.

\* \* \*

### *12pm, Friday: Switchover*

Upon opening her eyes, Phoenix was met with the expectant face of Rhys looking back at her through the glass of her tiny room inside the Conduit device. His presence gave her a feeling of safety that defied the situation. The tiny space she was locked inside suddenly felt even smaller. Yet the fear could not break through another emotion sitting squarely at the forefront. Her first reaction was not to force her way out because of an overwhelming sensation of claustrophobia, but to sit quietly and admire the man staring at her. The relief on his face to see her awake again filled her with the same. She liked that he was worried about her.

He placed his hand on the glass surface and lowered his head to look at the floor. Without him seeing, she copied as though secretly touching his hand. The gesture was one she knew would lead to trouble if he saw. She quickly removed it a moment later. The situation was not right to follow up on anything that had begun to bloom between them. Still, she enjoyed the odd thought or two of what it would be like to fling her arms around his neck and land one on him.

The thought was enough for now, she quickly decided.

"Can we get her out of there already?" Rhys snapped at Luke, who stood at the console to the side.

She looked to him, to see if she could spot any sign of her Sentient friend's worsening health. Losing his memories had left him as lost as Graham, only in the real world, and surrounded by strange beings he could hardly have understood. It was amazing that he had made it so far. She just hoped he could take a little more.

The hatch popped open after a combination of loud taps at the smooth panel that controlled the device. She wasted no time at all with exiting in style and instead leapt out like a jack-in-a-box at full tension. Rhys almost missed her as she came free of the Conduit.

"Woah! Easy, Phoenix, I've got you," he said, while holding her precariously in his arms.

"Thanks," she replied.

"It's weird, I could hear you from out here. You were talking out loud, but you weren't moving your lips. It was like you'd merged with the device somehow."

That was not how she experienced it. In her mind, she had held the conversation with Luke, as though she spoke directly to him. But then that was not possible. Somehow her recollection was incorrect. The device had to have altered it. Or maybe her own mind had done that to make it feel ordinary, when in fact she had possibly not even been inside her own body at the time.

She had little time to go into it in any detail, she had a job to do. Her meeting with Graham had been a short one, and a strange one too. There was something going on beyond what she had seen from her halfway-between-state. He was in the middle of a fight or a chase, she failed to tell for sure. What had been abundantly clear was the time restraint. They could not delay uploading Luke back to the Sentient world. It had to be done quickly.

"Luke?" she said cautiously.

"That name is familiar, Phoenix, but I still cannot remember much. If I am this Luke being, then we are friends?"

"We are. You were there with Graham, me and the others when we tried to stop Isaac reforming. We need to get you back to your own world. Do you know how to upload a mind from here?"

He looked over the device a few times, trying to figure out the answer. Then after a glance down to the person-sized pit they had dug and the open section of the Conduit, he smiled.

"I have a way of trying," he said. "It would require a direct connection between myself and the central processing flow in the heart of the Conduit."

"Great, how do we get to that quickly?"

"Do you still possess the weapon from before?"

She shared a questioning glance with Rhys, before separating.

"Yes, it's just over there. Why? Wait, you want me to shoot the inside of the device?"

His unspoken answer came in the form of two raised eyebrows, as his head tilted to the side a little. It said 'why not?' to her. He was right too, it did not matter if they damaged parts of the Conduit, as long as it did this one last job for them. After that, destroying the thing was going to be her next choice anyway, so they were not too worried about that.

The submachine gun stood leaning against the wall by the emergency exit. She had left it there just in case the driller man had become a nuisance while he worked at the console earlier. After retrieving it and turning on the eye tracking system, she raised it to her face and checked down the sight. She could see the red outlines of all the possible targets within the room as expected, the main of which was Luke, who rested his back against the tower.

“How is that going to help?” Rhys asked. “You’ll destroy half the insides with that thing.”

“I understand that the weapon is capable of firing only at selected targets?” Luke said. He waited for a nod from Phoenix before continuing. “A short burst of sustained fire on one position will be as effective as a much longer period with a drill. Unless you have a drill somewhere, this will be the best option.”

“Well, actually-”

“Not now,” Phoenix said. The last thing she wanted was to resort to using the same tool that had bored into her skull not long ago. The gun would be the right tool for this task then. “So, where do you want the hole?”

Luke pointed down into the pit beside the tower. The section they had removed earlier already took them a way inside it. The centre was closer there than anywhere else.

She handed the gun to Rhys then lowered herself into the hole. There she had to pull the collection of wires, left there from before, out of the way to see the semi-transparent circuitry beyond.

“You must not hit any of the glowing wires inside, Phoenix,” Luke said. “Aim between them. I estimate a two second burst on that area should break through to the central chamber.”

“What about shrapnel?”

“Yes, there will be more damage than required, some of which will cause pieces to exit the tower, but that should not stop us proceeding.”

With her back against the far side of her small pit, she took the weapon back from Rhys, then aimed down the sight at a section between the wire clusters. To manually select that area, she blinked at the free space within the device, which assigned a holographic reticule to the correct position. Then she was ready to fire.

“Here goes.”

Pulling the trigger released an automatic barrage, which ricocheted inside the small opening. The first few bullets appeared to skim right off of the glass and fly around the compartment amid a display of sparks and flashes. It was only a short moment of panic before the next few worked an inch sized hole through to another area behind. She let go of the trigger almost as soon as she pulled it. A look inside afterwards revealed a continuously flowing stream of energy, travelling back and forth between the upper regions of the tower.

"What do you see?" Luke asked.

"I think I see it. There's a lot going on inside here. What's this thing doing?" she answered.

"The energy you see is carrying information from the main tower, wherever that is within the city. It is a direct link to my world."

*I'm looking into another world?* Phoenix thought with awe.

"I will require a space around the size of your arm," Luke continued. "Please remove what you can of the surrounding structure to make one. The inside is much weaker than the outer casing, so you should be able to do so without any problem."

"OK," she replied as the pieces were pulled away without any real effort from her. It fell apart like honeycomb in her hands. A mere minute or so later and she had a hole she could force her entire arm through, if she felt so inclined - which of course she did not.

"Here, you must place this into the data stream," Luke said, handing her another cluster of his own supply of ordinary wires. While she had opened up access to the central processing flow, he had been busy putting the makeshift connection together. What he gave her looked like a thick arm of wires all tied into one long cable, with the bare ends forming one big and golden tangle.



Before she did anything with this, she checked the other end to see what Luke had planned. She was horrified to see the cable being tied around the glowing wires inside the black box on his head again. The last time he had done the same thing it had only been to communicate with the tower, not to transfer an entire consciousness. The plan had her even more concerned than before.

"Holy shit," she said, reacting without hesitation. "What the hell are you doing?"

"This is the only way, Phoenix," Luke replied.

Rhys stood beside him with a slightly guilty look on his face. He saw the danger too, but had understood the need straight away. This was to be a one way trip, so any damage to the black box was irrelevant. Except they had not considered one small detail; Jack, the human whose body it really was.

"What happens if this destroys the box? Will it hurt Jack?" she said.

Both Rhys and Luke stopped suddenly and looked to each other. Neither of them knew the exact chances of anything bad happening to the body, she could tell from their blank expressions.

"I don't think we have much of a choice," Rhys answered finally. "If we don't try this, Jack is still left a prisoner in his own body. Getting Luke out will free him too. I'm sure he'd rather we tried. I mean, you heard him before, he said he'd rather die than stay trapped."

She conceded quickly. "Fine. But if I see anything going wrong, I'm stopping it."

"Then why don't you let me put that thing inside the tower instead. You can stay here and keep an eye on Luke."

The idea was a good one, which she had only missed through stubbornness. It did not have to be her every time, Rhys had tried to tell her on multiple occasions. She decided he was right, he could help carry the load.

They swapped places with a worried stare as they passed. With the rest of the connections tied loosely around the glowing wires on Luke's head, they were ready to begin the process. All eyes were on the reactions from both the tower and Luke. If either of them showed signs of becoming overwhelmed, then the whole thing would be brought to an end – and with it the chances of Graham's escape from the Sentient world too.

"Right," Rhys said, another concerned look shot straight to Phoenix. "On three. One, two... three!"

"Wait," Luke called to Rhys. The interruption had Phoenix ready to jump in and stop it already.

"What?" Rhys replied.

Luke stepped around the tower to see him, Phoenix stayed close. "When the cable makes contact it will possibly react by emitting a sudden flash of light. You will need to avert your gaze as you proceed."

"Jesus, Luke, you could have said sooner. Right, stand back."

Stepping away and with his eyes barely looking at his own hand, Rhys prepared his throw of the cable with a couple of practice runs. Once he was happy with his judgement, he went for it. He threw the cable into the flickering stream of light inside the centre of the tower. Sparks began to fly soon after, as the cable interrupted the energy flow. At the point of contact, everyone within the surrounding area turned away.

Phoenix closed her eyes for a split second as the entire room came into full view, like someone had pulled off the roof and thrown a small star inside. Its harsh light attacked the corners of the room and finally destroyed the darkness. The war had been won and only now could the lightshow settle down again.

They waited for more.

After the bright flash had faded, it was at first peaceful again. A short delay had left them all wondering whether it

had worked at all. Then it started.

"It's starting to wo—" Luke tried to say.

With all the force of a punch to the face, his head snapped back and the veins in his neck began to throb. The blood raced around his body, making ridges in his skin like snakes traced their way beneath. The energy tensed every single muscle in his body, bringing his arms slightly out to his side as if about to sing out loud. But he did nothing of the sort. Rather he began to froth at the mouth as the power flowed throughout him.

"Shit, this is so fucking stupid," Phoenix said. The urge to yank the cables free soon took over. Only the moment she touched it, she felt a sudden build-up of electricity travelling up and down her arm. It was too much for her to take. She released her grip and pulled her arm into her chest, where she cradled it.

"Christ, what do we do?" Rhys called out to her.

"I can't separate him from it. Rhys, get up here and help me try again."

He scrambled out of the pit and joined her by the shaking form of Luke. They each then took a firm grip of the cable and started to pull at it in a rhythmic motion, like rowing a boat in tandem. All that moved at the other end was Luke's head, which cocked to the side each time they tried to remove it. Nothing would free him while the process went on by itself.

"Phoenix, stop, it's no good."

"What if it's killing him?"

"There's nothing we can do." Rhys fought the cable out of her hands and threw it to the ground. After releasing it, she fell into his arms. "We'll just have to hope he's already uploaded himself."

They stayed back while Luke flinched and twitched uncontrollably. His eyes were quickly becoming a bloodshot mess, which now looked in opposite directions to each other. All of the energy invading his body was running

freely, possibly wreaking an unknown amount of damage along the way too. All that remained was the escape of Luke's consciousness. The sooner that happened, the sooner they prayed it would end.

The very millisecond it did, a loud *pop* sound broke through the rest as if Luke had suddenly gone supersonic. Everything then changed in a heartbeat. The tower blinked out, sending the room into blackness; the electrical fizzing noises ceased, and Luke came free. He was released from the energy's grips and sent tumbling to the hard floor, where he silently came to rest.

Phoenix ran over before falling to her knees and sliding the last metre or so to him. A second sooner and she would have caught him in time. Instead she landed next to him just as his head crashed into the ground.

"Oh no, no, Rhys help!"

"I'm here. Don't try and move him."

Sitting either side of the body, Phoenix and Rhys stared into the glazed eyes, waiting for any sign of the remaining mind. For a worrying few moments of absolute terror nothing changed. Then a flick of his right eye.

"Is he?" Rhys said, unable to complete the thought.

"Jack, is it you?"

When the left eye began to roll around too, it was clear the worse had been avoided. The question that remained was whether they were seeing Luke or Jack coming around. Only the eyes were moving at first, until they found their correct calibration. The rest of his body still had not responded before they could see clearly.

"Jack, talk to me?" Phoenix said with a light tap of his cheek.

Once his arms could move, the rest of him quickly followed. After a few kicks and swings of his arms in confusion he then appeared to reset.

"Jack?"

“What the fuck did you do to me?” Jack replied. His voice remained the same as before, but he wielded it differently to Luke. This was definitely a human talking to them now.

“Thank God you’re OK.” Phoenix pulled him up to crush him with a tight hug.

“Hey, take it easy, I’m in pain here.”

“Sorry.” She let him go again with an equal amount of force.

“My head is bloody killing me. What the crap happened?”

Rhys placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder before speaking. “We’ll explain later, buddy. For now we need to check you over. Let me call upstairs to Matt, he should have a med-kit.”

The stress slowly dissipated as the three of them stayed huddled together. Phoenix could feel herself breathing freely for the first time in hours. Her chest had become uncomfortably tight from the immense pressure the situation had placed upon her. Now it could cause her no pain. She had gotten over it.

With his arm reaching out in front of him, Rhys initiated a call to his friend. The poor sod had been left upstairs with only the enemy Sentients for company. They probably had little to chat about.

“Matt, come in.”

He answered a second later. “Hey, you guys alright down there?”

Phoenix stood and let Rhys describe recent events to Matt. She had a message to send while he did that, which made her giddy just thinking about. There was some good news she had to share with Elliot and the others.

Using her own wrist computer, she logged into the messaging service she had told Elliot to check periodically. Her last message had been hours ago, they were all probably shitting themselves with worry.

"Hey, Elliot," she said into the video recording. She could hardly contain her excitement. "I'll be quick. I've found Graham!" Saying it nearly ruined her composure. "He's still at Sanctuary, somewhere buried beneath. Get some people and dig him out. Use whatever you can find, but make sure it's big enough to reach him underground."

Rhys interrupted from beside Jack. "What?" He was speaking to Matt through his wrist screen still.

"I've got to go. Get him out of there, Elliot. I'll be back soon," she said, turning to Rhys the moment she ended the recording. "What's going on?"

Matt spoke with an unexpected tone of concern to his voice. "Maybe you could explain what the fuck is going on outside? Did you do something? I'm going nuts up here."

"What is it?" Phoenix asked, after pulling Rhys' wrist device around to face her.

"I think you'd better see for yourself," Matt replied, cutting the connection soon after.

She looked to Rhys, who replied before she could ask him.

"Go," he said. "I'll stay with Jack."

\* \* \*

She set a rapid pace up the many stairs to the same floor as Matt. All the while she tried to guess what he had been so worried about. Something was happening outside and none of them downstairs had any clue. She was half expecting something pointlessly irrelevant. It would not have been the first time Matt had messed her around.

*There'll be trouble if this isn't important*, she thought as she mounted the landing of the fifteenth floor. From there, it was a quick jog down the hall to where Matt, the Driller man and his friend had been left.

"Matt, you here?" she called.

He replied straight away, only he was no longer in the same place anymore. He had moved to the room around the corner, where Luke had made his leap to freedom. She could feel the night time breeze flowing through this floor, a chill she had little to no time to ready herself for. A shiver raced up her spine when she entered the room.

"Phoenix, look." Matt was at the window, where his reason for concern suddenly became abundantly clear to her.

Looking out across the cityscape, she could see all the way to the tallest building in the centre, the New City Hall. It just was not as pretty as she had been expecting in the moment before she looked out. She approached the shattered window, where Matt stood, as the complete scene came into view. Below the sky the city still glistened and twinkled, but above it appeared an entirely different situation; it was anything but natural looking.

"What is that?" she asked, following a purple and glowing line streaking across the sky. It shot past much faster than sound could. When it finally caught up, the noise was tremendous. A deep and threatening hum burst through the air, sending a glass shaking vibration through their building. Then, after the first streak had vanished behind, it was followed by another, and another. Each new line raced by and reinforced the last. Only a few of them had gone by before the sky had become entirely purple, which appeared the new and more permanent shade above their heads.

"It's coming from the relays, look." Matt pointed, bringing her attention to the many beams of light shooting up into the sky. It was clear they were the source of the energy field's power, but where had the thing originated from?

Swallowing hard, Phoenix ran a sweaty finger over the surface of the glass in front of her, and watched as it stopped where the newly formed domed shape reached its

peak over the centre of the city. She had a good estimation of the place it had started.

"The tip is above the Mayor's building. That's where it came from," she said, thinking aloud.

"What?"

Ignoring her friend's question allowed her a chance to consider what to do next. From up there, they were not getting the full picture, she realised. There had to be more going on at ground level.

"Can we tune in to the TV from up here?" she asked Matt, offering her wrist computer to him.

He seemed confused at first, then thought it through himself. "Of course," he said, as he tinkered with her device for a short while. "There, try it."

It was almost immediately after switching it on that she could see the real state of things. The news was already reporting from the streets, where people were standing around with their heads arched to the heavens.

"Let me again reiterate," the news reporter said, a hand to his ear as he spoke. "We don't yet know what is causing it, but there appears to be a field of some kind currently blocking the centre of the city off to the outside world. We've heard of areas caught between the energy-field and understand that it has a repelling effect to anyone trying to cross it."

"My God. This is madness." Matt watched the screen over Phoenix's shoulder.

"There're also reports of armed gangs out on the streets too. I believe the police are locked in some form of battle with these individuals in various parts of the city. There's no indication that what's going on is connected to them, but I think you'll agree it's highly likely that it is. If you can, you should find safety."

The video stuttered suddenly as a small explosion occurred behind. The reporter spun on the spot. A line of men and women, all wearing black fatigues and armed to



the teeth, then appeared. They fired above the heads of those on the street. After bringing everyone to a standstill, they stood in place and waited for something.

Phoenix could contain her fear no longer. They all had the same black boxes on the sides of their heads. They were all Sentients!

"Get the others up here, now," she said, turning to Matt. She sent a stern look to usher him into action. He acted instantly.

"I'm on it," he replied. Except he only reached the doorway before the video report cut out and a hiss of static interrupted. When it cleared, an ominous voice called out to them.

"Citizens of New Chelmsford," it said.

"Who's that?" Matt asked from the other end of the room.

Phoenix brought the screen up to her eyes again and stared into it. There was no clear face between the distortions, only the vaguest hint of one. An outline was all she could see inside the monochrome picture. Still she had a fairly good idea of who this person was going to be.

"This is your reckoning; the storm before your final judgement," the ghostly face continued. "Your crimes will be wiped clean, but the cost will be high. Give yourselves to me and I will spare your pain. I am your saviour... I am Isaac!"

"Oh, that can't be good." Matt began to walk up and down the room. "What do we do now?"

There was only one option left, from what she could see. The war Luke had told her would soon come had finally landed at their feet. She knew the enemy, had seen him take form from thin air at Sanctuary eighteen months before; now she knew his power. All that those trapped inside his energy field could do, was retaliate.

"Now," she said, her eyes focused squarely on the New City Hall building in the distance. "Now, we fight back."



# Epilogue

## End of the road

The puzzle maze had barely changed since Graham's last visit. As a result he remembered the layout almost perfectly. He was confident he could create a map for the Sentients he brought there, just from his own memory. They would find the place more than big enough to keep them safely hidden within. If Isaac's forces found it, they would be stuck outside for a very long time. Even then, with so many complicated routes open to any intruders, it would take them forever to find their way around the place.

Despite this monumental success, Graham had something else on his mind for the time being. After finding his way back into the maze and firmly locking the entrance behind the last of the Sentients, his attention turned to Alex. He had carried her the rest of the way and could now feel his arms weakening. They had made it to safety, now he was at last able to set her down somewhere comfortable.

The first place he found was a bench in the partial garden scene from his childhood home. In the background, the Sentients had begun to congregate around the small fountain in the centre of the area. They had obviously never seen such a thing before and were understandably curious. So while they made themselves at home and were finally able to tend to the injured, Graham sat beside the bench with Alex's hand in his.

Kindness had followed Graham ahead to the entrance of the puzzle maze and was there to step in the instant Alex's limp body was placed. She had stopped responding completely and rested far too peacefully for Graham's liking.

"Please," he said, "you have to do something."

With a hand placed upon the sparkling outline of Alex's large wound, Kindness began to try. His effort was visible by the dimming of his own body's glow. Just this once Graham wished there was a face to go with his new friend, or anything else that he could use to judge his progress. The silence was hurting his insides a little more with each second that ticked by.

"What's wrong with her?" Graham found himself asking.

"She has been impaled through her energy core."

"So, what does that mean? You can repair the damage, can't you? I saw you help the others earlier."

Kindness remained quiet for a second or two, then removed his hand after his glow returned to full strength. "I am sorry, Graham Denehey. There is nothing I can do."

"What? No, you have to do something."

"Graham, she is dying." After his diagnosis Kindness stood and stepped back. He waited for Graham to join him, again in total silence.

But there was barely even the smallest part of Graham that wanted to do so. He could not bring himself to leave her, not like that. Staying in place and kneeling by her side, he let Kindness wander away to begin helping those he could. Once alone he burst into tears and became a mumbling mess upon the floor. Taking her hand and squeezing it as hard as he could, still could not wake her. There was nothing he could do, except wait.

With the pain came an overwhelming tiredness that caused his body to ache and his head to become heavy. Fighting it was pointless, a waste of energy that he possibly did not have left anyway. Instead, he let his head drop

forward, until he could rest it against the bench. With his head between his arms and Alex's hand gripped tightly, he found a moment of quietness to clear his messy mind.

His own daughter was safe somewhere in the real world, he knew that. But it failed to make what he was going through any easier. The being he was losing had become important to him in so many ways, ways that had entirely surprised him. This was the most human Sentient he had ever met, including Luke. She represented a glimmer of hope, a chance of forming a bridge between their races. They were not that different after all.

Understanding what drove these people and what life was for them, had dispelled everything he thought before. Where once he saw them as strange beings not much more advanced than bees, now he could see the intelligent society they had really formed. First-hand experience had changed his opinion forever.

Now, that most recognisable of human traits had been found too; compassion. Alex had shown that to him by breaking him out of the puzzle maze. Her only motivation for doing that had to be concern for another. She could have left him there without interacting at all, but she had chosen not to. She had stepped in and saved him instead.

He could not stand to think she was already gone. Not having the chance to at least thank her for what she had done, made him well up again. As he thought over the exact words he would use to show his gratitude, he found his throat closing up, like it was refusing to ever utter anything resembling a goodbye. However many times he tried to.

When he began to feel his arms ache, he decided it was time to let go of her hand. He raised his head, sniffed, and then placed her hands together on her stomach. It was not until he finished tidying her clothes up, that he noticed the wound had stopped sparkling. It now glowed with a steady and warm light instead. He moved back and watched as it spread throughout her body, until it completely covered her.

Then she opened her eyes.

"Alex!" he shouted, but stopped short of pulling her up for an embrace.

More and more, the light built in intensity. It was quickly beginning to blind him at such a close proximity. In reaction he had to stand and turn at a slight angle to her. Like trying to avoid looking at the sun directly, he hovered his hand a few inches in front of his face and toyed with the light. This allowed him to watch the transition from a safe distance.

"Thank you, Graham," Alex said, her voice strong and booming, just like Kindness'. "Do not forget me."

"No, please, don't go, don't leave me like this," he replied while grimacing from the sudden influx of illumination. It was almost impossible for him to turn away completely, he did not want to miss anything.

"You have helped me find myself again. I only wish it could have been under better circumstances. You must do something for me, Graham."

"Anything, you name it, Kiddo."

"You must return to your family. Alex will be waiting there for you."

She smiled as her features blurred and gradually disappeared from view, finally consumed by the brightness. All that was left was an outline, like that of the other Sentients. Every part of her that had once resembled Alex had gone.

"Alex, Alex, what's happening," Graham said.

A hand landed on Graham's shoulder from behind him. It was Stephen.

"She has returned to her normal self again, Graham. This is the real Alex, the Sentient that was hiding beneath."

As the light reached its peak, the room was suddenly flooded with reflections from all around. It then blinked out like someone had switched off the sun. When Graham and Stephen looked back at the bench, she was gone.

"I... I didn't get to thank her," Graham said.

"You didn't need to, Graham. She knew. I must thank you myself."

"For what?"

"I have been in her company for some time. Since that terrible day, when she lost her partner, she was in a state of denial and going from one personality to another. Finding you in here and taking on your daughter's image was the saving of her. You brought her back from a place of constant darkness. You saved her just as much as she saved you."

Graham sat on the edge of the bench and stared at the spot where Alex was only moments earlier. He was sure he could still feel her presence, her life-force perhaps, where the body had been.

"What now then?" he asked.

Taking the other end of the bench, Stephen sat with his hands upon his knees. "We get you home," he said. "This place will keep the remaining Sentients safe for now. But it is no place for a human mind to be trapped. You have to return to your own body, in the real world."

"I need to find Luke to do that."

"Indeed we do, Graham. Indeed we do."

The strange smile upon Stephen's face told of his eagerness to get started with their search. It was clear there was not a moment to spare. Returning him to his real body was all that mattered now. Every one of the Sentient beings left in their world was safely hidden, so there was nothing stopping them trying now.

If Luke had successfully re-entered his own world, then it was just a case of tracking him down and continuing on to the way out. Although that already seemed an impossible task to Graham. After everything that had happened, he was finding it hard to stay positive. The last thing he wanted was to get almost there, only for them to be stopped at the last moment.

So why was Stephen's expression so infused with excitement?

“Look, Graham,” he said, gesturing to the group of Sentients sitting in circles about the grass.

When Graham looked, he suddenly understood it all. There, standing and smiling back at him from the other side of the area, was Luke. He had made it.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Graham said, his eyes wide and still slightly moist. “I’m going home.”

The End

###

*Many thanks for reading the second book in The Sentient Trilogy. I hope you enjoyed it and are looking forward to the last book of the trilogy.*

*If you liked it, then why not let others know by writing a review and posting it on the Amazon website.*

*Thanks again.*



## About the author



Ian Williams is a Science Fiction writer from the UK. He lives in a small town roughly 50 miles outside of London.

Although born in Barking, Ian was raised in a town in Essex called Danbury. Until the age of eleven he was an ordinary child with nothing extraordinary or particularly different about him. This changed when he was diagnosed with Becker's Muscular Dystrophy just before starting secondary school. This condition only affects around 2400 boys in the UK, making it a rather rare one.

After finishing school and sixth form, Ian went on to a career in the UK Court Service. He spent seven years working there, but had also begun to write as a hobby. When that became his everyday routine he found himself lost in a world of infinite possibilities, never able to accept just one outcome of many. In the end he chose to ride the tide of time and allowed the future to be an unknown space, where only the stories he lives can ever alter that timeline.

Sorry, I think I lost myself there for a moment. Anyway, Ian is now writing as much as his fingers will allow, or until his keyboard decides to explode from all the typing.

## **Other books by Ian Williams**

### **1. Transitory (released 2014)**



### **2. The Sentient Collector (released January 2015)**



### **3. The Sentient Mimic (released September 2015)**



## **4. The Sentient Corruption (due 2016)**

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